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Isolation

NOVELS BY
JERZY PETERKIEWICZ

The Knotted Cord

Loot and Loyalty

Future to Let

Isolation

JERZY PETERKIEWICZ

Isolation

A NOVEL

IN FIVE ACTS

HOLT, RINEHART AND WINSTON

New York

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First published in the United States in 1960

First Edition

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 60-11753

87003—0110

Printed in the United States of America

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ACT ONE

Sets and Props

ACT ONE: SETS AND PROPS

ONE

A spy on holiday, he was once told, should either take more interest in his wife, if he has one, or find himself a mistress. Alexander found a mistress on the day his wife died, but this was by no means a convenient coincidence.

A week before, he had decided to give himself a holiday. There was, indeed, no one else to give him one. If Alexander could have stated his true profession when filling up forms, he might perhaps have described himself as a free-lance spy, and like most free-lance people he tended to skip holidays altogether. This time, however, there would be no skipping: he had made quite a bit of money in Central America, and as for Central America, it, too, seemed to be taking a long holiday from revolutions.

Now he was waiting in a London café for a woman who in all probability came from just that part of the world he wanted to forget, at least for the length of a holiday. She was late, but Alexander felt she would turn up in half an hour or an hour, it did not matter, and waiting was a form of holiday relaxation, inferior perhaps, but worth practising before a possible love affair. While waiting he tried to reconstruct the features of her face. He always did that before meeting new acquaintances. Then he would isolate one detail of the face, a nostril or the edge of an ear, and build a little fantasy about its owner, a sort of biased introduction to the character he knew nothing about.

He certainly knew very little about Dolores. Only her

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name in fact. But he remembered that her chin was too strong for the rest of her face, which had the evasive beauty of women of mixed blood.

He had met her at the first party in London to which he had been invited, by some diplomatic mistake it seemed, because he could identify neither the host nor anybody else in the room. But it was a diplomatic party all right. Most of the guests wore that permanent half-smile which only diplomats and waiters can adjust to the right angle, like a bow-tie. And since any one of them could pass for the invisible host, Alexander tried to be equally polite to all present there.

When he found himself trying to distinguish between the Nicaraguans and the Costa Ricans around him, he became slightly depressed: it was like falling back on old professional habits, and he had only just started his holiday. He made for the door. Then she popped out from somewhere, smiling straight at him, her eyes glistening with curiosity and triumph, as if she had intercepted a retreating statue of Apollo.

"Dolores, el profesor está aquí," an elderly man said over the heads of two individuals who were looking for something on the carpet. The heads went up and the man behind them disappeared. The noise of the party swallowed his voice.

"What an awful evening," she said, and put her hand on Alexander's arm. The gesture was surprising, but very friendly, and the hand light.

"Well, you said it," Alexander murmured, and caught the scent of perfume, a puzzling message yet more intimate than her first gesture. "I am just leaving," he added, and stared into her face. The black eyes stared back.

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"I know," she said. "It's a dull party. I mean the people. Just look at them." She swept her hand round and knocked something on a cocktail table behind her. She did not bother to see what it was.

Her English had a subdued perfection of rhythm and tone that did not go well with her face and swift spontaneous gestures. The face was dramatically undetermined, the Spanish blood still trying to conquer the Indian in every expression and mood. Around the nose especially, a hardness like that of a sculpture resisted the onflow of the younger blood, and she gave the impression of being both vivacious and placid. This contrast within her beauty confused him.

Alexander heard himself say: "I wish we could meet again. But not at such a party."

Dolores once again placed her hand on his arm and let it stay there a while longer.

"Not at such a party, oh, no!" she exclaimed. "It's awful, isn't it?"

"Where shall we meet then?" He felt that his voice sounded perhaps too insistent to achieve his purpose, but it achieved something, for she replied now in her very subdued English:

"At any place you like."

"There's a nice café off Leicester Square, the sort of place hopeful young actors go to. Rather amusing. It's called, oddly enough, 'Changing Sets'."

She laughed and took out an eyebrow pencil from her bag.

"You write the address. Here, please."

She turned quickly on her high heels and snatched a paper napkin from the cocktail table. Alexander bent

and began to draw a smudged plan of central London. She held her bag out to give him something hard to write on.

"It's just round here." He touched a square sign on the napkin and smudged it further.

"Don't spoil your pretty picture. I shall rely on it. Implicitly."

She stressed 'implicitly' as if to make him wonder whether she meant anything she had said. But Alexander did not wonder. He had the self-confidence of a boy-scout, if not that of a spy.

"I'll see you there then." He stood now in the doorway.

"You haven't told me yet when you'd like to see me." Her voice had a mocking undertone, and he noticed it quickly enough to assert himself once more.

"Today week perhaps." His manner was rudely casual. "Will you be free today week, next Friday, I mean?"

"Yes, of course." Now she smiled gently, as if she were calming an over-anxious adolescent. He sensed the change in her mood: two associations quickly spanned his thoughts and he was reminded of his age. Thirty-nine.

"Three-thirty?" he said, still being assertive.

"Half-past three will be fine."

Dolores opened her bag and dropped the folded napkin into it. Her face became immobile.

At that moment he realised how habit-ridden his mind was. In his job he had trained himself to leave gaps between unexpected events and those he could partly control. Whenever, for instance, he arranged a meeting with a person chance had brought to him, he would invariably leave a week's gap, just in case some useful in-

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formation might come his way before the arranged meeting. He had to allow time to blow stray advantages in his direction. And out of habit he had done the same to Dolores. He had already placed her at the distance of a week, and now this waiting for her at the café was part of a spy's calculation, habitual and obsessive, and he despised himself for it.

She entered the café in a red loose coat, flecks of snow melting on it as she walked towards his table. The clock between two theatrical prints on the wall had discreetly stopped: she was not all that late. Dolores stretched her hand out and he kissed it.

"It's snowing," she said, genuinely surprised that it was. "I didn't know where to park my car. And I asked for 'Changing Scenes' instead of 'Sets'. How stupid of me. And there are sets here, I see. Very appropriate too." She went up to the wall and looked at the framed sketches of designs which she did not like in the end, and said so after sitting down.

"Thank you for coming." Alexander could not help staring at her. She had a beauty that demanded to be watched, for it wavered from mood to mood, a firm imprint of two races never changing under a restless surface.

Her coat slid down her arms, draping itself coyly, and her neck, so suddenly bare, seemed to be emerging from red waves. Dolores knew his eyes were caressing her neck, and she moved her fingers along it, to protect it or to provoke further. This slow movement stirred up the scent on the skin: Alexander was encircled by the magic ring of perfume.

"I owe you an apology," she said, opening her cigarette-case. He rushed with his packet and she took his cigarette

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and began to finger it, the match in his hand patiently burning away.

"I didn't mind waiting." Alexander misunderstood her, for she smiled at his manly conceit and explained:

"I wasn't really late, was I? What I meant was the horrid party last week. It must have bored you terribly."

Her use of adjectives had the idiomatic obviousness of party chatter, and this was the only thing about her manner that Alexander instinctively resented. Yet it never occurred to him to talk with her in Spanish, which he probably knew as well as she did English. From the start he must have accepted the play of contrasts in Dolores, in her appearance, her gestures and her speech.

"Never mind the party," he said, lighting another match. She took the light this time. A waitress brought two black coffees and walked away.

"But I do mind."

"Why? I didn't even meet the host, so why should I care?"

"You met the host, *señor*." She flung the Spanish word at him, and he looked up startled. "But *he* was she," Dolores added quickly. "And she is here."

Alexander saw her cigarette was out, lighted another match, and after a moment of hesitation chuckled, nodding over his cup like an imbecile.

"I see, I see now." At last he stopped chuckling, his fingers drumming the table with embarrassment. "So you're His Excellency's wife."

"He isn't 'His Excellency' yet, but he will be one day." She said it as a matter of course, neither proud of her husband's prospects, not angry with Alexander for being ignorant of her present status. On the contrary, she

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appeared to like his complete unawareness of who she was and why she had accepted his most undiplomatic invitation.

Alexander managed in time to mumble something about her husband's indubitable abilities as a diplomat, although in fact he did not even know his name and nationality. Dolores disapproved of this turn in their conversation. She ended the subject pointedly by uttering what sounded like an embassy bulletin:

"My husband is at present on an official visit to the capital"—which capital she did not say. "He will be back in April."

Alexander noted two things quickly: that it was only the end of February and that she wanted him to regard any allusion to her husband as taboo. In a way, he eagerly welcomed the taboo. The most hypocritical trick women usually adopted in an illicit love affair was to refer the lover now and again to the absent husband: an indirect sort of blackmail, since neither of the male parties could ever discuss the object of their amorous contention face to face; and on the whole, the lover had the worst of it, as he could hardly compete with her moral references to conjugal rights.

Dolores dismissed the whole conjugal blackmail in one phrase, rounded off by a smooth gesture of her hand; like deposited luggage it was to await collection until some unspecified day in April. "He will be back in April," just that much she wished to make clear to him. He began to admire her for these original touches, so unlike the foreseeable behaviour of married women who stoop to adventure, trying all the time to lean against a pedestal, with the husband stuck on it in a very respectable posture.

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He wanted to show her his admiration, and in an equally unbanal way. The only thing he could do on the spur of the moment was to act as if he still knew nothing about her. Dolores liked him to be innocent and assertive through his innocence. In her eyes this changed him at once from a man to a young boy aspiring to be fully grown-up and possessive.

"We'll meet again, shall we?" he said almost coldly. She was quick to understand his play-acting, and the first act of love unfolding against the expected background excited her; she answered, imitating the sharp cadence of his question:

"Today week perhaps. Will you be free today week? Friday, three-thirty again." Dolores repeated the sentence he had blurted out on leaving her party, almost word for word, but he did not recognise it. Instead he beckoned to the waitress, pretending to be in a hurry.

"Yes, Friday three-thirty. Splendid. You'll be very busy during this week, I imagine." He tried not to show that he would have preferred to see her earlier.

"Oh yes, very." Dolores put on her casual English manner of speech. "I have to give four parties before Thursday, you know. I shan't, of course, invite you to any of them. They're bound to be as boring as the other one. You mustn't appear at any of my parties any more. I never invite my friends, you see. My real friends are not in diplomacy, and I hate diplomats. They all look and behave like performing seals. Seals, you understand."

"I understand." Alexander was puzzled by this sudden outburst of social temper.

"Perhaps you do. My real friends are as crazy and irresponsible as myself. Are you irresponsible? No, you

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aren't. You don't look crazy. You're probably mad. Most mad people are mad because they feel they have too much responsibility."

"I am . . ." Alexander wanted to say something about being an archæologist or a mere amateur excavator, the accepted and rather fashionable camouflage for a spy's dreary occupation, but she did not allow him to finish. She became nervously talkative, dictating to some invisible tape-recorder her own scenes in the opening act of love, although she could not be sure whether she was falling in love.

"I don't want to know who you are."

"You don't even know my name," Alexander smiled, ready to do a mock ceremony of introductions. But Dolores would not have that either. A frown like lightning indented her forehead and she said briskly:

"If I wanted to find out what your surname was and the rest that goes with a name, I could have asked our secretary to bring that list of guests to whom invitations were sent."

"Why didn't you?" He was curious.

"Because it would have been too easy."

"It's practical to have one name at least, Dolores. You see, I know yours. Mine is Alexander."

"But you don't know my surname, Alexander."

"No, Dolores, I don't."

"Good. You're an ideal partner."

"A partner for what?" He was playing the ping-pong game of returnable words in which lovers indulge until words become a nuisance in bed.

"For a nomadic sort of relationship, Alexander," she said in a very serious voice, getting up to go.

He did not quite know what she meant, and followed

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her to the door. Her car was small and had the letters C.D. on the plate. They were half snowed up, and so was the car's top. Alexander took a handful of snow from the top, squeezed it and let it fall on to his shoe.

Dolores assumed her matter-of-fact expression which was surprisingly becoming, and asked him:

"About next Friday—shall I come to your place?"

"Impossible, Dolores. I am married." He tried to dress it in a casual tone to make it sound like her conjugal taboo. She recognised the intention.

"Never mind, we'll meet at the 'Changing Sets'. I like the name very much. And I'll think of something in the meantime, I prefer it that way, Alexander. I've told you, you're an ideal partner."

"Am I?" He was really wondering whether he should kiss her on parting. Somehow it did not seem right to treat Dolores like an ordinary woman about to commit adultery. Mechanically he put his hand on the top of the car, gathered some snow, and touched it with his lips.

Dolores reached for his hand, opened it slowly, and laid a kiss on the melting snow within his palm.

TWO

It was mostly her car they talked about when they met the following Friday. She looked wistfully pleased with herself, but not a single suggestive word passed between them to link two light phrases together and start a flirtation. She warned him, almost seriously, that she would

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always drive him in her car. No other vehicle was permissible to keep their relationship running out of doors.

"I am a nomad, Alexander, and nomads prefer to use their own camels."

"I don't mind," he said. In fact, he was grateful. Driving cars did not impress or amuse him; moreover, he had experienced one bad accident on the road near Caracas, from which he escaped with his life, but he still remembered that other chap in his car, a sulky Indian informer who had burnt to death, the wheel wedged into his lungs. Alexander preferred to be driven to his end by someone else, if the end were to be a motorised death. Dolores would do that in the least unpleasant manner.

"The C.D. is rather a bore," she reflected. "People notice these things, and the police are all too helpful. I wish I had an ordinary number."

"Plates can be changed, Dolores. Besides, one might try a fake one, and cover up the other in emergency."

She liked the mention of emergency and looked at Alexander with tender expectation. Did she guess his profession at that moment? Maybe. But he did not care either way. He reminded himself once more that he was on holiday, a spy's rare rest from tension, and even the concentration of driving was not to be required of him. He thought that it might amuse Dolores if he really produced that spare inconspicuous plate for her car.

"It's four-fifteen," she said, getting up from the table.

In the 'Changing Sets' the usual collection of semi-employed actors and fully preoccupied agents sipped espresso coffee and watched strangers. Dolores was for them an exotic stranger, a new and plumper Dolores del

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Rio, as aloof as the other, yet like the other within the reach of all greedy eyes. The café was a fourfold screen against which she acted, reflecting the communal desire.

Alexander felt an odd pang in his heart, which he refused to diagnose as jealousy. Why should he be jealous of her? He was not her lover, perhaps he would never be. The safest tactic, as practically always in love, was to wait for the woman's move. But he had already waited and seen her different moves: in the doorway at her own party, at their first meeting when she had encouraged his aggressive manner to flatter him, and now as she posed herself for other men, stirring his competitive anger.

"Let's go," he said.

When they got to her car behind an old cinema, she opened the door and glided in. He sat down next to her. Dolores drove like a man, her precise movements drawing on a hidden strength in her body, which was again in contrast to the softness of her limbs and the careless swaying of her black hair. She spoke little when driving, and he felt like a prisoner sentenced to a pleasure about which he could say nothing beforehand. So he kept silent.

When the car halted at the red lights near Marble Arch, she glanced at him quickly and in this clash of their eyes the first signal of passion sparkled, but neither of them could guess then its meaning for both of them. Dolores put her head out of the window, looked up and noticed a blue neon with the name of a hotel. He skipped in his thoughts the first obvious association and expressed the second, hoping it would not bounce over the faint boundary between vulgarity and wit:

"In Paris one might have different problems, but not this one. No homeless lovers there."

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The lights changed and the car moved on. Dolores turned into a side street, stopped, opened her handbag and began to powder her face. Alexander could see a quizzical twist of her mouth in the compact mirror.

"Here our housing problem ends," she said. "I told you I would think something up. She's away in Nice."

"Who, Dolores?"

"My friend."

"A very irresponsible one?"

"Yes, very; she's now chasing her lover in the South of France. You see, he takes a holiday from her at least twice a year, but she will always do the same thing, chasing the poor wretch from Cannes to Venice and back."

"I am most grateful to her." Alexander opened the door, and went round to help her out. They left the car by a telephone-box. Dolores led the way in silence. As they walked he rushed from one thought to another, across the wild distances that separate excitement from anxiety, fear from joy; and he experienced an uneasy feeling that the trappings of sex were, after all, similar to the cloak-and-dagger affairs. Was she by any chance drawing the parallel for him out of some perverse sense of humour?

"It's on the ground floor. Ignore the porter, if there's one around. He gets lots of unnecessary tips from Ela; that's my friend."

Alexander spotted a grand-sounding name above the entrance. It was a block of flats.

"What shall we imagine we are as we go in?" As he spoke he adjusted a discreet parcel under his arm. It contained a bottle of wine, and a corkscrew. A spy's thoughtfulness had its uses. Dolores adored his question. She put her hand on his shoulder, pressed it down and sighed.

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She did not care that they stood just under the light in the most visible of porches.

"Oh, Alexander," she whispered, "let's pretend we are very smart decorators. I am your female assistant. You're the big expert. Next time I'll bring rolls of wallpaper and rulers and things."

"May I bring a bucket, Dolores?"

"Yes, do." She laughed so loudly that she could have woken up a porter on the top floor, but they found no one in the hall. The key clicked and they were inside a dark flat with a scent of eau-de-Cologne lingering somewhere in a corner. Dolores led him by the hand into the next room, his parcel with the bottle fell on a soft object. He forgot about the wine and the absurdity of the whole situation. What an extraordinary assistant she could really be, if their other interests ever coincided.

In the glare of an electric fire which rose, it seemed, from the white carpet, Dolores knelt, her hands clasped hard on the sofa as though she were about to pray. A frightening sense of ultimate recognition that would come through the trial of their bodies approached them now, becoming their guide, impersonal and almost cruel in its readiness to impart knowledge.

"Say something, please, say something," Dolores muttered, then she broke into Spanish, begging him to remain two, three or four persons that she felt were being unchained from his habitual self.

"I can't tell you that I love you. I don't know whether we shall ever love each other."

"Yes, we cannot know until we have staked our souls."

He was surprised that she spoke of their souls, but she meant what she said. What possible use could his soul

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have? And what value? His would be the lowest stake, he thought; hers—he could not even risk assessing its worth.

They made love in anger, as though they were trying to prove to someone else, who was in them now, but at any other time beyond their reach, that such a brief recognition of identity mattered more than his or its separateness. They were presuming to conquer all that seemed still separate in the space around them, in the furniture and the shadows on the walls, in the glow of the fire and in the stuttering clock. For this and perhaps for this alone they twisted their limbs, prolonged the cruelty of desire, learnt the whole human geography of pleasure all over again, only to forget it once more before the next act.

Dolores withdrew from under his legs, slid on to the carpet and, half-covered by the shadow of a lamp-stand, stared from afar at his sockets which were retreating deeper into the featureless expression of death that comes over every face after a repeated act of love. Alexander could see just the outline of her body, and the outline fraying in the light from the electric fire suggested a more powerful build, the thighs expanding in her recumbent posture.

And in that moment, against his wish, he had to acknowledge a wide-open awareness, emerging from down below like a flickering light in a precipice. It told him that he had already committed himself to an identifiable emotion which also had a physical reality in the shape of her hips, in the warmth of her thighs, in her voice and in her tired silence. It was a commitment to love. He had bargained for what social prattle calls an affair, taking the same risks as she did, but now he saw lying at his feet a real stranger whom his love made both real and strange, and would go

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on doing so. For there was no escape from this commitment as long as the emotion itself remained attached to her physical reality.

Dolores knew that he was watching the terror of love, and to ease his agony, she prompted no words that might roll into affectionate banalities. But silence had to be broken and she said almost humbly:

"Stay with me longer."

He did not reply, and she spoke again:

"I understand how defenceless one is when this happens."

Alexander smiled in the darkness. He no longer needed to assert himself in her presence, he no longer had to prove anything to her; a master and a gigolo were both in him, both irrelevant to that other kind of power which was his for the duration of the act.

They left the place as they came, groping the furniture and the walls.

"Where do you live, Alexander?"

"In Hampstead."

"I'll take you there."

"No, I'll go by taxi."

But she insisted on delivering him, as she put it, to his threshold, and she did so, except that he gave her a wrong address. What was the point of applying this caution when all he had willingly accepted from her and in her made the very idea of caution meaningless? He did not wish, however, to start sorting out excuses at two o'clock in the morning.

His house was in the parallel street. He walked there and found the door open. The nurse stood in the hall talking to someone he could not recognise at first.

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"Mr. Arnin," the nurse called out, "we've been trying to find you everywhere; at the club, at Professor Keller's, even at the little cinema by the station. And Father Murphy here has been so helpful."

"Thank you, Father," he said mechanically to the man in the hall. Then he asked the nurse: "What's wrong?"

"Well, it's Mrs. Arnin, sir. She swallowed some pills and I called the ambulance at once. They rang from the hospital an hour ago. I am very sorry, Mr. Arnin, it's bad news. It looks like she was again trying to . . ."

Alexander interrupted her.

"I know, I know. May I have a word with you, Father?"

"Certainly, Mr. Arnin," said the priest, and pushed the nurse gently into the room on the left. Then he shut the door behind her.

There were still clusters of snow on the window-sills, and soaked in the moonlight they looked like soft baby skulls.

THREE

Now this business of being a spy is bound to be glamourised after each war; and since wars come more or less at regular intervals, every twenty years spies are due to get their revival. And so it goes on, unless one happens to be professionally indifferent to the whole fuss.

Alexander Arnin treated his profession with moderate respect, but he respected the human experience it gave rather than its adolescent thrills and its limited technique.

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In a way he had inherited the technique from his father, who was half Turkish and half something else, both halves having been stranded in a shipping company that scattered its dingy offices in every Mediterranean port. The salary used to offend his father's self-esteem on the first day of every month, and to make up for this, spiritually and materially, he would supply useful information to other companies at a respectable rate of payment.

The son was well equipped to take over his father's side-line interests: brought up in London by his English mother, he had the advantage of starting his career as a gentleman with an odd assortment of languages to his credit. Besides English and Turkish, he knew modern Greek, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic. To keep these languages fresh in his mind, Alexander Arnin was constantly on the move, collecting and supplying information, but his fees were far more than respectable, they were very exclusive. For it was in his condescending attitude to his clients that Alexander proved himself an artist. Like a true artist he valued independence above all, and free-lancing offered him a wide scope for diverse tasks. He could not stand routine. Only during the war he had occasionally compromised and worked for the government, his justification being that there were, after all, such temporary creatures as war artists.

Linguistic abilities apart, Alexander had something of a scholar in him. He loved acquiring unusual information, preferred dreary details to generalisations, kept his facts in neat compartments, and his memory itself was like an efficient filing system, with boxes, cards, and a formidable index. Although he did not mind thinking of himself as a free-lance spy, he would rather see the purely

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professional side of the business as a kind of one-man advisory bureau. He was, in fact, a special adviser with special information to sell.

And, of course, he did not worry about the future. By that time he would have accumulated enough specialised knowledge to sit on any Brains Trust or supervise any television panel game; he might even become a national celebrity, ready to spring a sensational book of memoirs on his loving public. He had that much in common with retired professors of philosophy, archæologists, anthropologists, butterfly collectors and memory men: their profession and his overlapped, especially where the prospects for the future were concerned.

Alexander should not have married. A free-lance special adviser of his mobility ought to travel light, and a wife on a journey is like excess luggage; a spy's wife, however, is worse than that—she resembles lost property claiming its owner.

Needless to say, Alexander did not marry for money. He had enough. Neither did he want a wife for camouflage. His scholarly vagaries were better camouflage than any domestic idyll could provide. At twenty-seven he simply experienced a longing to be burdened with steady responsibility. Since he wished it to be steady, he had to marry for love, and at the crucial age of twenty-seven Cupid seems to be bristling with arrows.

His wife was a Jewish refugee, which also helped, for he could identify his feelings for her with vague humanitarian aspirations. And if anybody needed security through marriage, Kira did: she saw in Alexander a husband with her father's reliability, her brother's recklessness and her mother's possessive love, and she wanted him

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to be all of them at once, improvising a continuous family reunion at table and in bed.

Kira had a tense, almost hysterical face and a lazy body, and this combination made her desirable in his eyes, at least during the first years of his marriage. He took her with him on his travels, even when his professional judgment was against it; and she inevitably got bored, waiting for him in some Macedonian hovel or Bolivian hotel *de lujo*. Yet he could not accept the obvious fact that Kira's sense of security would always collapse in a changing environment, that she associated travelling with persecution, hiding and escape.

Finally she herself recognised the danger and begged him to live in England, in a respectable suburban villa with a nice set of business associates as permanent guests at their dinner-table. Her mythological Papa would undergo yet another reincarnation and grow a cosy paunch on Alexander's body, the reckless brother being kept in reserve for a Saturday evening fantasy, with drinks, dancing to gramophone records and practical jokes.

He never reached that kind of trusting sincerity with Kira which would have allowed him to explain about his odd travelling jobs, pointless excavations and inane lectures to patient exotic audiences. Underneath his love and his belief in the good of responsibility, Alexander preserved enough scepticism to see both in a larger pattern of existence, which included human and therefore his own self-delusions, petty treacheries of the mind against the heart, plus the perennial admixture of tedium and irritation.

He knew in the end that in order to save their marriage

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he had to compromise with his love for her rather than with her directly. And this was another mistake. Love has its practical arrangements and silly devices for those in-between moments, but it resents compromise, if such a compromise is done at the expense of mutual emotions. Alexander's final giving-in to Kira was a compromise which emptied their love and left marriage intact on the surface like a shell.

He bought her a large and dreadfully comfortable villa in the depression belt of Hampstead and removed himself from it to collect his odd yet profitable pieces of information about railways in South America, undiscovered mines in Turkey, religious sects in the Balkans, oil swindles in Arabia, homosexual holidays on the Greek islands. Kira remained in London, with her imaginary theatricals of a family reunion, but the great impersonator of a husband was gone. He returned, of course, from time to time, to be a guest of honour, a seasonal Father Christmas with quaint presents from remote places.

Each visit to his own house pacified Alexander's guilty feelings about Kira's lack of family life and Jewish insecurity which were capable of absorbing all the little dramas happening around her in the neighbourhood. His obsessional manifestations of responsibility, on the other hand, found ample outlet in the money spent on comfort, gifts, and feminine whims. Whenever the bills he had to pay added up to a large round sum, Alexander heaved a sigh of relief: he had done his responsible best to satisfy Kira's wishes and could go away with a clear conscience to replenish the money squandered on her and their horrid house.

He seldom asked himself whether he still loved her,

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and in his proud self-esteem there was hardly any room for doubting Kira's affections. She certainly showed enough emotional dependence on him to please his vanity; she never missed an opportunity of telling him how good and generous he was to her and her cousins who had the habit of turning up out of the blue from such places as Copenhagen, Tetuán or Ajaccio.

Only during his rare moods of depression when he pondered on his life while staring at his battered suit-cases, Alexander would suddenly meet Kira soul to soul, so to speak—and in that moment of instinctive double-knowledge he could not delude himself any further: she had become as alien to him as her tragic ancestry which, anyway, was beyond his comprehension.

He was by average human standards exceptionally tolerant, he never blamed a race or a nation for an individual's stupidity and malice; and yet his very tolerance led to his estrangement from the person he had married only for love.

Kira's Jewishness had originally given him no worry or puzzlement: he took it for granted as part of her personality, which he fully accepted and loved. Instead he saw a deep-rooted self-hatred in Kira which he thought could be brought to the surface and dissolved by still more tolerance and affection. Now, after years of marriage, his love had become completely neutralised by the long and noble practice of tolerance, and in its place lay an ugly foundling born out of wedlock, whose name, if there was a name for such a sterile emotion, could only be a word of abuse. Alexander had isolated Kira from his likes and dislikes, he kept her in the hygienic wrapper of marital understanding, then with a sharp grin of irony realised

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that the understanding had bred ignorance and that the tolerance had reared an alien.

There in Hampstead, surrounded by her pseudo-Viennese furniture and ultra-modern comfort, lived a handsome Jewess, still nursing the healed scars of her family's drama, as distant spiritually from him as he was distant geographically from her. An illiterate Indian sleeping in the porch of the hotel seemed closer to Alexander's idea of humanity than the woman who was his loving wife. For all his humanitarian beliefs, he might yet live to dislike a race through an individual, and this individual would undoubtedly be his own wife Kira. One should never test universal ideals in the relationship of marriage—that much Alexander learnt from his seemingly respectable failure.

It was in the ninth or tenth year of their marriage that Kira developed symptoms of a strange illness. She had always been terrified of childbirth, and repeated with a masochistic satisfaction that it had been the cause of her mother's death. She would not even think of adopting a child for fear that it might bring an infectious disease into the house. The symptoms Alexander first noticed were also connected with fear, but they would usually vanish as soon as a doctor prescribed treatment. Not that Kira was simulating an illness to gain renewed love from him: she had a hypochondriac's curiosity about her body which made her readily admit the absence of ailment, provided she herself came to that conclusion. Being a mild hypochondriac, she distrusted medical advice and never called a doctor on her own initiative.

This time she asked for a doctor, and later became annoyed when the symptoms disappeared soon after his

visit. The symptoms, however, could not be ignored, because they came back with an overpowering suddenness. Her spine was affected; she complained of piercing pains in her back and at first refused to lie down, believing that her bones would crush against the pillow. She preferred to walk about the rooms, bent down like a hunchback, her face contorted with fear of what might possibly happen, but strangely patient in the presence of Alexander and the doctor.

The doctor suspected that some of the discs were already broken and that an operation might be necessary. But he also knew the risks of such an operation, and for the time being stuck to the routine of observation. A couple of days later, however, the whole situation was changed: Kira could walk normally, her pain recurred at longer intervals and seemed quite bearable. Then again an attack broke her body in two, another came and paralysed her legs below the knee, leaving the spine unaffected; in a few months these new symptoms vanished too, only to emerge some weeks later in a different part of the body.

A year elapsed without changing Kira's condition radically: she went from quick lapses to equally quick recoveries, and the doctors, who multiplied in proportion to the attacks, could not agree as to when and how she should be operated on. Observations followed observations. Alexander hired a competent nurse, paid her more than she had asked for, and left England for Central America, where he hoped to earn a very substantial sum for a few rather involved survey missions. These surveys had hitches, though; one of them being open-handed bribery which Alexander detested, like tips, on moral grounds, and the other, inferior means of transportation

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which were bound to delay his overall scheme by several months.

A new factor, however, entered his relationship with Kira. According to the nurse's reports, she was in great pain when he started on his journey; then she suddenly recovered and went on a holiday to Sicily. From there she sent him long Germanic travel notes, together with spidery sketches in pencil, and he nearly wept over them when they caught up with his meandering progress along the coast. By then Alexander had convinced himself that what Kira secretly wanted was a long tour of the Mediterranean with him, in utmost luxury, a mature sort of honeymoon, and he, of course, had to be entirely at her disposal with no silly archæological jobs to interrupt their mutual rest.

He took the first chance to fly to London to discuss the plan with her, but on the morning after his arrival Kira fell ill and began her macabre tour of the ground floor, clutching the furniture and knocking the walls with her stick. He waited a week for the doctors' verdict, and again they did not agree, so he returned to his Central American survey. Nurse Thompson was left in charge of the patient. And, as he might have foreseen, the nurse's report followed him a month later with good tidings: Mrs. Arnin had recovered and would soon write to him herself.

The second report altered the familiar pattern: Mrs. Arnin had attempted suicide. Nothing sordid, of course: she would never mutilate her body, use a razor-blade or anything of that kind. That much self-love Kira possessed. Her choice of a destructive medium fell on a bottle of medicine: she drank the whole lot in the middle of the night, but Nurse Thompson found out in time.

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Alexander decided to return to London immediately. His material was nearly collected, he approached the clients in Mexico City and handed the stuff over. The fees, when added up, amounted to an impressive sum in dollars. He deposited half of it in a Venezuelan bank and boarded a plane in Caracas.

The dream of an idyllic holiday on his native soil and in the company of his wife was shattered almost from the start. Kira became obsessive about his presence in the house: she often called him by her brother's name, then wanted him to stay out, in case her whole family turned up for Papa's funeral, yet Alexander knew that her father had had his splendid burial twenty-five years earlier.

On the day he fell in love with Dolores, Kira swallowed a handful of pills which she had hoarded up under her mattress. She had fooled Nurse Thompson and him, and was now dead.

FOUR

He had arranged to meet Dolores on Monday afternoon, and on Monday morning Kira's funeral took place in a Jewish cemetery. As far as Alexander could remember, Kira was indifferent to her religion, and they had been married at a registry office. Her last note, scribbled on the blank page of a book she was reading before her suicide, said nothing about any burial rites. But one of her cousins turned up unexpectedly from Tetuán and, on hearing the tragic news, refused to accept it as suicide, demanded a

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religious funeral and then proved most helpful in all the final arrangements.

Alexander was still suffering from shock, and this prolonged stupor bleared every sensation for him. He could observe the dignified manner of an old bearded rabbi, hear clearly the Hebrew prayers, watch the cousin and do what he did, yet all the time he felt nothing, neither sorrow nor relief.

The whole religious ceremony seemed to him a dramatic performance which he attended in a drowsy mood of reverence, but it had no connection with Kira, the Kira he knew and had once loved. He was even surprised that in the end there came a burial. Who was the person they were going to leave among all these marble slabs?

But he experienced a moment of horror when suddenly, after the prayers were over, they turned their backs on the grave—the rabbi, the cousin and someone else he did not even know—and quickly walked away without looking behind; the ritual was over and the dead body over which the prayers had been said no longer had any claim on the living—it was discarded rubbish, belonging to the earth. Like Orpheus he wanted to cast but a glance and suffer punishment for a mere turning of the head; nevertheless he could not do it and followed the others to the gate of the cemetery.

Kira's cousin had previously irritated him on many occasions by oozing a bubbly charm for which, however, there was always a price to pay; now he seemed desperately human, a link with something vast which stretched beyond a family myth, a race or a hope of ultimate survival. Alexander wished he could talk with him, not about her,

because the body she had voluntarily discarded weighed heavy in the air they were both breathing; some subject could be found to warm their words by, some simple topic outside pain.

The cousin left London soon after lunch, and Alexander had two hours to kill before seeing Dolores. His mind was serenely numb, only his hands were restless. He wanted to give them both something to do.

A shed stood at the end of his garden where he kept a grotesque collection of tools, all of them having proved useful over the years for his more typical undertakings in the cloak-and-dagger style. He went to the shed and pottered about, dusting the numbers on the registration plates he could find there. Out of a dozen or so he chose the most modern-looking plate whose number started and ended with seven. Every spy is supposed to have a lucky number. His was apparently seven. He did not believe in it, but a Polish gipsy had told him so.

With the plate under his arm, he walked across the garden towards the empty house, which he looked at with distaste. It was not much better from the front. He would gladly sell the palatial monstrosity, but it seemed too much bother to ring up his agent.

Even inside the house his thoughts about Kira were vague, confused and entirely unemotional. A newspaper lay on the kitchen table. Alexander took one folded sheet out, spread it against his chest with one hand and with the other wrapped the car plate into it. He made a clumsy parcel, tried to put a rubber band over it, but it broke, so in the end he carried the thing under his arm as before, the cheap paper tearing at the plate's edges.

He decided to go downhill on foot. At Swiss Cottage he

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jumped on to a bus which was slowing down at the traffic lights, and sat down next to a bearded man who held an open book on his knees. Alexander peeped over the man's arm and recognised the Hebrew characters.

The bleared sensations came full circle: his shock had spent all its numbness and he began to feel pain. But this was a change at last, a welcome relief from the stupor of nearly sixty hours. He got off by a small gate into Regent's Park, and as he strolled by the pond strewn with wrinkled shadows, he was glad of the rendezvous and imagined all sorts of pleasant absurdities awaiting him. Oddly enough, he could not visualise Dolores's face, he only heard her precise English phrases in his mind, and they resounded in its hollow corridors, each echo longer than the passing phrase.

Her small car stood near a path to the bridge from which two lonely women, clearly cut out from the cold sky, were watching rubbish afloat on the water. Alexander halted, followed their eyes and, having spotted a match-box just under the bridge, speeded up towards the car. The C.D. plate reminded him of the surprise he was carrying under his arm.

She must have heard his footsteps, for she leant out, a cigarette in her waving hand. Alexander waved back. She wore a minute beret, and the mass of hair escaping from under its grip made her neck look narrow and fragile. It was now that her beauty struck him as obliquely original, and he was proud to be her lover. He had seen many women in South America who had a similar incertitude of race in their features, but none of them, however beautiful, could compare with the idol possessing Dolores's body and illuminating it from within.

He quickly lowered his head and kissed her outstretched hand: the cigarette fell from it to the ground. She, too, did not know what to say to him without sounding too formal or too intimate. And, as during the previous meetings, she quickly hid her hesitation behind an idiomatic turn of phrase.

"We're both bang on time. Look, it's exactly half-past three."

Alexander automatically looked at her wrist-watch, and it was three-thirty.

"I've brought you the plate," he said.

Her eyes became enormous while she was thinking what plate he meant, then her nostrils quivered and she burst out laughing.

"No, I don't believe you."

"Here it is." He gave her the torn parcel, and Dolores glanced to the right and the left, pretending she was being cautious, then she unwrapped the metal and read the numbers aloud.

"Seven is my lucky number," Alexander said, just to keep the conversation going. He had the sensation of seeing her for the first time, but with a simultaneous dream-like conviction that this first time was a scene from a play, re-enacted word for word.

"It will be my lucky number too, from now on."

"Shall I put the thing on, Dolores? It has a catch here," he showed her the back of the plate, "so it won't slide off the other."

"We'll give it a try later, shall we? when we get to Ela's place." Dolores dangled a key on a ring before Alexander's eyes and chattered on. "She's still chasing that poor man. Had a postcard from Ela this morning, from Bayonne,

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sounded desperate. And from him a card, too. Just greetings."

"Where was his card from?" Alexander asked, settling into the car.

"From Bordeaux."

The motor started up.

Only once during the drive she threw a question at him, which could have easily pushed him off his balance.

"What were you doing this morning?" she asked.

"What did you say?" he pretended not to have heard.

"I had a strong compulsion to see you this morning. I simply couldn't stop thinking of you. But I didn't know how to reach you. Just as well. We should not interfere with each other's time-tables."

This mention of time-tables seemed to him so much out of place in a conversation between lovers that he paused and skipped his turn in the dialogue.

"Were you very busy this morning, or just lazy, like myself? I can never do anything in the morning." They were now near the block of flats.

"What was I doing this morning?" He, too, knew how to hide meaning behind a worn-out phrase. "Let me see. Nothing special, just routine."

For that Dolores kissed him on the neck below the ear.

Alexander had stepped over the most slippery of temptations, the one which uses sincerity as a bait. Now he was sure that no matter how many private confessionals their love might pitch above their bed, he should never tell her of Kira's death. There are, no doubt, different ways of keeping a mistress happy. His would have to be a spy's way, running smoothly alongside the ghost of a secret.

Inside Ela's flat Dolores behaved like a true mistress.

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This was not the day for groping in the dark. She drew the curtains, switched on the light in the next room, left the door ajar and in the triangular reflection shining on the floor placed a bottle of wine and two glasses.

They sat on the thick carpet at the edge of this puddle of light and drank, staring into the next room, as if expecting someone to enter from there. Alexander imagined it would be a bearded rabbi with a prayer book, and he and Dolores would stage an obscene ritual to frighten him away.

He was still to learn much about the tricks of association which every couple of lovers finds out by chance, unaware most of the time that they are the oldest properties of fantasy, aping limbs and shapes, confusing touch with smell and taste with sound.

Sitting on the carpet by the half-open door, Alexander stumbled over one such association and was tricked by it into an act of love which had the taste of nightmare.

The macabre setting in his memory demanded a grotesque parody of love. He saw the wisps in the carpet change colour and grow into blades of grass, and crouching in that grass was a female animal he wanted to destroy with his body. The animal's fear arched her shape, and he identified this fear with his own crawling on all fours towards a grave, but whose grave it was he could not remember. Like a leech, the image was clinging to his belly and in order to destroy it by a suicidal fall into the grave he pushed forward, the grass and the shape before him collapsing into wobbling horror.

The triangular reflection of light withdrew under the door which had shut with a bang. They were in darkness. Dolores said in a whisper:

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"It must be the draught. I left the window open."

He touched her back and it was sweating. Quickly he covered her with his shirt. She began to shiver.

"We'd better get dressed."

"Yes, Alexander." Her voice was meek and she obeyed him at once, collecting her scattered clothes from the floor. He walked into the next room and sat there half naked, his trousers trampled at his feet. When Dolores looked in he was examining a framed photograph on the desk. A fat man smiled from its glossy surface, leaning against a huge sack. Black letters embraced the sack, praising Brazilian coffee and a firm's name.

"That's Ela's husband," said Dolores.

"Is he dead?"

"Oh, far from it," she exclaimed. "He's very much alive."

"So this is his flat, really?"

"But, of course. While he's on business in London, that is."

"I see."

"You don't see at all, Alexander. Ela's lover is his partner. I'll explain it to you one day, it's a long story."

"Where is he now?"

"In Bayonne, of course. With Ela. She hates travelling alone."

"I see," said Alexander and smiled back at the man on the photograph.

Dolores was putting lipstick on her large insatiable mouth, and the pallor of her cheeks emphasised the intensity of the red. She noticed the contrast, turned away from the mirror and asked Alexander half-jokingly:

"What would you do, if I suddenly died?"

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"I would not go to your funeral, Dolores."
His answer sent her eyes back to the mirror.

FIVE

Alexander was leading a double life, though there seemed to be no apparent reason for it. Twice a week or more he returned home in the early hours of the morning, feeling tired yet full of latent energy, and sneaked to his study where he slept on a camp-bed. He did not like crossing her part of the house to reach his own bedroom which was next to hers. After a few such attempts he had developed a positive sense of impropriety and did not think it fair to disturb Kira's furniture with the sound of his steps. So he made straight for the study and lay on his camp-bed in silence. He never waited long for sleep.

Alexander dismissed Kira from his dreams, and in a different way succeeded in curtailing her memory in the house. Of course, he was reminded of her, but this did not go deep: he could brush a thought of her away as one gets rid of a catchy tune each time it comes back. Since he did not believe in ghosts, no other possible trace of her existence could register in his conscious mind.

If he were prepared to analyse his love for Dolores, and this he did not want to do, he might perhaps discover a crooked association linking Dolores's zest for life with Kira's hatred of it. For the time being he was anxious to match her ingenuity which, he noticed, impressed him continually: he wished to amaze Dolores, not only by his

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love-making but also by his choice of sets and props. In this respect Dolores had shown an initiative from the very beginning. What other sets were needed to preserve the novelty of their meetings? How many fantastic props could he find by himself, when hers had become familiar?

Alexander had an artist's regard for someone else's ideas, so he would not try to outdo her originality by obtaining the flats of his friends while they were out of town on business or on holiday. Instead he applied his practical mind to the background of their love, taking charge of all those petty arrangements without which a successful liaison could not last a month. He wanted theirs to last more than a year, more than ten years. As soon as he thought of it, he childishly stretched his hopes into a distant future and saw himself a grey-haired man still devising fake number-plates for Dolores's car. And she, of course, would never lose a single spark of her beauty.

Alexander knew the advantages of pedantry in his profession; like a Teutonic scholar he could go on for ever checking and re-checking his facts. Now he devoted his entire experience and a spy's pedantic intelligence to their time-tables, telephone arrangements, alternative places where they could wait for each other—wine-bars, pubs, parks, messenger-boys and night porters.

When he presented Dolores with a neat map of London done in three colours, with squares, circles and crosses, which in turn were upholding numbers and fractions from one to eighty-five and three-quarters, she gave him a prolonged look of truly Latin admiration, and asked:

"Is this extraordinary thing for me?"

"Yes, Dolores, but I have a copy too."

"Exactly the same?"

"To the last dot, Dolores."

"What is it for?" she asked, this time disappointing him a little.

"Well, for us. Look at the squares, for instance. They're petrol stations, in case you get stuck somewhere. And here," he solemnly pointed at the circles, "at all these pubs and wine-bars you can get your favourite drink, Dolores."

"What is my favourite drink, *querido*?" She used a Spanish term of endearment and blushed like a young girl declaring her affection.

"Marsala," he answered, rather impatiently, and keen to explain his map.

"You're right, Alexander," she exclaimed. "It is Marsala. And I never realised. I just drank it, on and on, for years."

"Well, now you know where you can get it in London."

"And what's this complicated number and two *hrs* beside it?"

"The *hr* stands for hour. You see, I noticed when waiting for you at that pansy place near Hyde Park Corner and at that café, you remember, where they took you for Queen Soraya, I noticed that the same characters appeared there at certain times and I didn't like the look of them much. So I jotted down the relevant hours."

"I am very stupid, Alexander, but what hours?"

"Well, the time of their coming and going. It's a useful bit of information, don't you think? If we wish, we can avoid being seen by those characters. And here, my beautiful goddess," he kissed her black hair, "are the post offices from which you can send an urgent note by messenger. It often costs less than an express letter. The trick is to know the exact distance from the post office to the addressee; the charge is worked out by miles."

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Dolores looked up at him and sighed. It was a humble sigh of appreciation.

"But, Alexander, you've done it all for me. And in such wonderful colours."

"For us, Dolores. I have a copy, I told you that." He was being pedantic, but she liked him even more for it.

She led him on to other detailed explanations, queried some obscure signs which were supposed to clarify the map, and in the end folded his splendid guide to Cupid's London and put it in her bag.

"Thank you very, very much," she said, making an elaborate curtsy.

"One day I'll do something similar with the seasonal changes as well," he warned her in the earnest tone of a boy-scout. "It's useful to know which part of Regent's Park, for example, is most pleasant after sunset in July. Or how many boats on the average are free in mid-August on the pond in Battersea Park, at what hour in the afternoon precisely, and so on."

"Alexander, you're simply marvellous." He could just imagine her saying this in exactly the same voice at one of her parties. He liked, though, hearing his name spoken in the way she spoke it. It sounded longer and warlike. Kira insisted on calling him Alex; in bed, when they still shared it, Alex often became Ali, pronounced Alee in Kira's unfortunate babyish manner. He hated both Alex and Alee.

"I rather enjoy doing such things. It's like inventing a game and playing it oneself." At this moment Alexander felt so close to her, sincerity overflowing his thoughts, that he could easily have told her about being a free-lance spy, and very well-paid too, if she had only made some allusion

to it. But she did not. What she finally said sounded charmingly naïve:

"But you must know your 'London extremely well, Alexander, to put all these squares and crosses in the right places."

"I could have done the same for you with Buenos Aires, or Istanbul for that matter."

He did not boast, he merely stated a fact. His knowledge of most capitals would have astounded local guides. London was perhaps a little more difficult to split into such very specialised compartments. Throughout his life he had only come to London to rest, and out of a vague sympathy for his native city he had been reluctant to practise his profession in its streets. Now he really enjoyed spying out odd nooks and corners in his virginal London for Dolores and himself.

"By the way, in your map, Alexander, did you take account of early closing days?" Dolores had a very serious expression, she was not teasing him. She must have caught his do-it-yourself mood.

"Naturally," he answered with disarming satisfaction.

But the arrangement he was most pleased with concerned telephone messages. They had to share at least one telephone number, and Dolores preferred him to know hers. But Alexander would not open their secret liaison to any risks whatsoever. Besides, he distrusted the telephone as a beneficial invention which allowed government spies to tap the lines whenever they wanted to. His professional bias was always directed against government clerks who called themselves agents, special, confidential or unspecified.

His idea had the simplicity of prison communication by

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knocking on the wall. Except that he used telephone rings. Twice a day, at eleven or twelve-thirty he could communicate with her merely by dialling the number. He hung up as soon as she picked up the receiver, then rang again to confirm the first call. Dolores then knew that he wanted to see her at one of the marked places on the map.

All she had to do was to chase up a few of his cross-references, remember what day of the week it was, drive off within half an hour, and he would be waiting for her in accordance with the scheme. Thus on Tuesdays the appointed place was a Viennese café opposite the Green Park Underground station, on Fridays a wine-bar off Regent Street. Alexander marvelled at the simplicity of their arrangements; Dolores nodded gratefully and studied the map with appendices in her spare time. As it happened, she had much time to spare.

Alexander plunged himself into this new life with a youthful enthusiasm. For the sake of Dolores, he thought, Kira had to be kept alive, and he observed the continued pretence by behaving like an unfaithful husband, sneaking in and out of his house. After a fortnight or so he could not imagine any other way of being in love. The more he involved his emotions, the more he played with his cautious devices, and it pleased him to remind himself that Dolores, too, indulged in her own theatrical fantasies. It was she, first of all, who had told him that he would be her ideal partner. And he willingly accepted her challenge.

Slowly he began to unravel the secret of his passion, although he could not yet relate it fully to Dolores and her rôle in his love. The passion itself was oddly intertwined with his profession, because he had never, in fact, resolved the problem of his being a spy. True, he wanted to make

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the business side of it more respectable, better paid and totally unromantic. But the reason for it was a bashful memory of his father who had done everything under the counter, accepting due payment as baksheesh, always fawning upon his cowardly clients. His poor father had had neither the imagination nor the cynicism to blackmail back those who were threatening to blackmail him.

Alexander learnt the rudiments of the spying technique from his father, but he refused to turn it into a seedy occupation. By being too successful in his job, he lost nearly all its thrills on the way. But he felt too deeply about his father's seedy example to admit to himself that a gentleman spy is unfortunately a contradiction in terms.

Now, in protecting his mistress, and his own love, with a screen of secrets, by acting a double rôle in his intimate life, he was achieving something close to a spy's ideal. He became a puzzle to himself; each new act was bound to twist the puzzle further inwards; in the end he might come within the reach of perfection by stepping inside his own shadow. How exciting it would be to make the shadow spy on its master, to beget one's own cunning informer! Between the gesticulating limbs of sex he had glimpsed the hidden meaning of his vocation, and it doubled his pleasure.

It was sex, of all the unexpected channels of experience, that brought Alexander directly to the essence of his professional gifts, for he came to identify it in his mind with the spy's passion for isolation. The isolation he wanted to maintain around himself and Dolores was growing into an obsession, but it remained none the less the spy's obsession with his precise range of vision, always under his control yet always likely to explode into his watchful face.

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Perhaps this also meant that at the age of thirty-nine Alexander was at last attaining his maturity, a state of character which spies seldom experience because of the vagrant nature of their interests. There was still another sign that he did feel approaching maturity and not a male's satisfaction with his best mating season: he was more and more compelled to recall his father, and whenever the parental image visited his memory it had his age, a thirty-nine-year-old father meeting his thirty-nine-year-old son as an equal.

Literally out of the Mediterranean blue his father came down and re-enacted a half-forgotten scene against the same old setting. Alexander saw him seated on the doorsteps of their summer house in Cyprus, his long pipe symbolising both the parental authority and the Turkish ancestry. Alexander stood under the overhanging vine and watched a shadow creeping on to his bare legs.

He was no more than seventeen, and the conversation between father and son arose out of the first job Alexander had done for him, and he knew he had pleased his father. Yet he received more warning than praise, and he could not then understand why.

His father puffed at the ancestral pipe and rambled on in his Levantine commercial English:

"Alexander, you must every day take full account of your assets. Do not go beyond your means, watch your liabilities and do not overestimate your coming profits."

"I'll do my best, Father," he answered, watching the shadow on his knee.

What his father was trying to express did not concern book-keeping or any other sort of business training; he

was gravely commenting on Alexander's attempts to learn the spying technique. Later in his life Alexander thought of his father's comments as pathetically ineffectual. Now he had to admit for the first time that the old chap did not talk utter nonsense. He remembered how the dialogue went on, the pipe sending up rings of smoke between sentences.

"Every good agent," his father continued, avoiding the word 'spy' out of propriety, "if he wants to be very good, so very, very good indeed, must not only work hard but must keep also a safe deposit. Not in money, my son, but in what big money cannot purchase: he must have a solid deposit down in his character." His father touched his prosperous-looking stomach with his pipe as he spoke, to show that there probably, lay the solid roots of any character.

Alexander mumbled something in agreement.

"A very, very good agent—and you, my son, could become very, very good—ought to know all his character, especially what is in that safe deposit, because without knowing his true character he will never, my son, become very, very good indeed."

Whenever his father said 'indeed', Alexander gathered that the old chap was imparting extra wisdom for his filial appreciation. So he quickly showed his appreciation by asking a not-too-stupid question.

"Father," he said, "what lies at the bottom of our character?"

This pleased Arnin senior, for he inhaled deeply, nodded, inhaled again, touched his stomach with his pipe, and finally spoke like an oracle:

"A secret, always a secret, my son."

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"I don't quite understand, Father." Alexander pulled his shorts up and scratched his thigh.

"You will, my son, you will when you are mature, very properly mature. Every agent, I tell you, has a secret passion, but often he does not permit the secret passion to come out of that safe deposit, and so it blows up like a bomb and destroys him."

Alexander scratched his other thigh; he was a bit frightened, and did not want to show it in front of his father.

"A secret passion," his father went on, "is the agent's power and also his weakness. It pushes him on, so it can very unexpectedly push him into his grave. Therefore, to keep the balance sheets in order, one must remember about the secret passion and look at it very bravely when one is very mature, indeed."

Now, almost twenty-two years after hearing his father's lecture on the spy's inner paradox, Alexander stared down into his memory. It was like a dark well, with his own reflection at the bottom, still afloat and still young. He stared and stared until he asked himself whether Dolores had a secret, too. Not a secret kept from him, but from herself, a passion, in fact, hidden at the bottom of a well.

Was he helping Dolores to bring her secret passion out in the open? Was he as ideal a partner as she believed him to be?

Once he had got hold of this question, it fell down like a curtain. The first act of his love was over.

ACT TWO

Costumes

ACT TWO: COSTUMES

ONE

"Do you love that woman?"

"Yes, I love Dolores."

"Why do you love her?"

"Because——" there came a rustling pause, and the voice in the tape-recorder emerged more precise than before—"because she has intuition, not just an animal's intuition that signals danger and seasonal changes; hers receives vibrations of moods which come from the core of character and thus can measure its depth. Dolores knows already what I don't know yet of my character's inconsistencies."

"Surely one doesn't love a woman for her psychological insight?" came the prim reply. "You're mixing up intuition with flattery. She flatters you by showing constant interest in you. And she merely confirms what you imagine is your mystery; you could easily find out what your inconsistencies are, if you had less vanity."

A dry cough cleared the throat and the voice ascended to a pompous pitch.

"No, it's not self-illusions I am talking about. One can be both fully aware of one's vanity and tolerate it for all sorts of reasons. Of course, Dolores flatters the male in me: I know I am loved by a woman whose beauty could without any effort intimidate men or make them uncertain. Yet it's this directness of relationship she or maybe both of us have at once established that gives my love a

precision. I mean an emotional precision. With Kira, for instance, it was either a clinging kind of love, with all its emotions sweated out literally through the skin, or it was a friendly exchange of substitutes: I give you understanding, you give me tolerance, I take your generosity, you take my complete dependence on you."

"Come, come," said the admonishing voice, "you shouldn't compare marriage, even a happy marriage, with an affair."

"But it isn't an affair."

Something crackled before the voice retorted:

"Maybe. In your terminology this is love in perfect isolation, naturally. But have you thought of just one point of difference? Into your isolation you both bring your clearest moods. You are on your best behaviour, all the tedium of prosaic details left outside, at home. That's why your love seems to you so precise and that's why your relationship with Dolores has a directness you could never experience in your marriage."

"But I am certain I love Dolores. This certainty I project on to her love"

Alexander was about to switch off the tape-recorder when he heard Kira's voice, just a shred of a sentence, not erased and still breathing out her sounds. *Beware of*, it said clearly, then came a faint buzz and a prolonged sss fading into a grim silence. The 's' might have been the beginning of a word like 'suicide', 'scaffolding' or 'scandal'.

This mutilated ghost of Kira's voice put him off playing back his dialogue for the second time, which he had intended to do. Her interference annoyed Alexander, because it seemed as if she had hidden in the machine in order to overhear his interview with himself.

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Some three or four years earlier he had received a tape-recorder from an American client who was keen on the idea that spying should be modernised by means of gadgets. In fact, what the American wanted was to modernise eavesdropping, but Alexander would not quibble about such distinctions with men possessed by an *idée fixe*.

He thanked the client for the present and travelled with it for a couple of months, never intending to use it, until one rainy evening in Caracas when he felt groggy and bored, he took the tape-recorder to bed and chatted with it like a drunk who entertains his sad image in a mirror. He was pleased with the result when he heard it the next morning, for the machine had somehow captured the shy conversationalist in him, brightened up his voice and produced an illusion of leisurely talk. What Alexander could never achieve in a straight dialogue with another person happened accidentally on the tape when he had a dialogue with himself. His thoughts could imprint themselves on a reasonably intelligent speech.

Once he made that discovery he consulted the tape-recorder as if it were his portable Mr. Watson, and by playing back their mutual effort Alexander often found a solution to his current problem. Later, however, he erased the recorded dialogue very carefully, and the modernised Sherlock Holmes was off again to teach the slow-witted Watson how briskly they could deal with mystery once the business of talking was over.

With his pedantic regard for other people's foibles, Alexander wanted the tape-recorder to be his exclusive pet even during his brief stays at home, so he was very disappointed with Kira for having used it without his per-

mission. Suicide or no suicide, she should not have played with his portable Mr. Watson. He had given Kira many expensive toys, anything she asked for, but like a spoiled child she had borrowed his toy as well, the only toy he really liked.

The conversation with himself about Dolores which he had recorded and played back, re-echoed soon and quite unexpectedly in his real life, when he met Dolores in a *pied-à-terre* newly acquired by her. She had just come out of the bedroom—and stood against the white door in a long mantilla, covering her head and shoulders. The rest of her body was naked.

"Do you love this woman?" she said with her eyes turned away, the curve of her buttocks and the edge of the mantilla reflecting in the long mirror by the door.

"Yes, I love Dolores," he repeated the whole phrase recorded on the tape, and this unintended play-back surprised him. What she said next surprised him even more:

"Why do you love her?" Dolores imitated Alexander by referring to herself in the third person, and he nearly blurted out the entire monologue about her intuition which the tape-recorder had helped him to memorise. He jerked his thoughts out of the groove and mumbled something flattering in reply, while his glances were suspended on a mounting desire.

Was it going to be another lesson in the pseudo-artistic use of nudity? In a moment he forgot the sounds on the tape. He looked at her curious, excited, yet also able to analyse the pornographic tableau and his own sensations about it. A naked body with a black contrast about the neck and arms recalled certain famous contrasts in painting. Dolores evoked the same oblique desire as the two

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Majas of Goya placed side by side. Watching them together, the eyes could never be certain whether it was the perverse duality or the perverse oneness that gave a sharp slant to excitement. Maybe Dolores intended the trick to conjure up that kind of association, but whether it was meant to be perverse for her rather than for him, Alexander could not decide.

But he wanted to find out what prompted her to display those lascivious veils. Had they any connection with her wish to remain a woman about whom he would know nothing else but her erotic habits? These were his available facts; if he persisted in collecting them, he might one day learn the truth about Dolores, but it would be a truth totally unrelated to her life at home and in society. Just as well—isolated love resembled art for art's sake, and this he preferred.

He saw, however, cruder examples of the same art all around him, and they seemed to emphasise the purpose of the mantilla trick. Photographs and snapshots peered at him from the walls and shelves, and they showed the owner of the flat in all the variety of his exhibitionist moods. The flat belonged to a friend of Dolores, whose name, she said, was Terry. This could not be doubted, since Terry loved putting his signature on every snapshot which flattered his physique.

Some photographs were rudely enlarged and hung in dainty black frames on the walls, reminding Terry of Terry's past delights. One shrieked from above the piano:

"Terry at the Club bouncing on the grass, July, 1956." The other giggled from between the windows: "Me Terry, with him Colin, after a naughty swim on Tuesday, August 27th, 1957." And yet another confessed with

touching modesty: "Just me in the solo nude, the Club, September, 1958."

In fact, they were all in the nude and on all of them Terry's roguish *alter ego* peeped out from under his fat tummy. After ten minutes of viewing so many identical Terries, Alexander began to feel self-conscious about his formal suit and the contrast intended by her equally formal mantilla. If he undressed now, he would, like Terry, stoop to the level of autopenography.

With small measured steps he approached Dolores and began kissing her face. She did not move, her body warming his through the layer of material. Alexander heard her whisper:

"Don't undress."

He did not. To learn the meaning of her prurient art he had to accept all its stages as they came, without a sign of prudery or disapproval. Otherwise he would never get to the centre of her obsession. And would that centre, when reached, prove the whole secret of fulfilment?

His hands moved upwards, touched the mantilla and pulled it down. Then he altered the pictorial association by shifting the emphasis from her shoulders to her waist. This black stripe divided her body into two separate images, the lower one receding into a new perspective; and she stood very still, as though it were a courtly ceremony of dressing. Alexander, too, prolonged the scene and the tension. Words stretched like elastic.

"Dolores—I experience my love for you—in so many different ways."

"I want it to be many different ways. You must never get used to what you like in me."

"It's impossible to get used to beauty." His voice be-

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came a little pompous, like its shadow within the tape-recorder.

"What you call beauty is only in your mind, Alexander, and I would hate to see it escape through your eyes back to my body. I love my body now, because it's more yours than mine. Anyhow, I . . ."

She was suddenly afraid that they might be taking an overdose of conscious thought, so she offered her last sentence to laughter. Her fingers played with the lapels of his jacket. Still laughing, she said in a provocative tone:

"One day I shall count all your buttons, up and down. You have so many, Alexander. Why don't you draw a map of your suit?"

At that very moment one of the uninhibited Terries leered at him from the wall. He was glad he had his clothes on; they kept his desire alight. And he drew Dolores close to his pulsing body. One of the buttons pressed through the lace and hooked the mantilla.

An act of love is a puzzle of details, subtle and prosaic, which gradually dissolves, leaving a single clear detail like a focus of light. This happened to Alexander, as he imagined it would. The erotic screen in his mind isolated one detail, and it was the design repeated in the lace of the mantilla. Shaped like a small leaf, it resembled the minute beret she had worn on the day they had met in Regent's Park. It was now clear to him that the smallness of the beret in contrast to her abundant hair had as perverse an appeal as the mantilla shedding lace leaves between her breasts.

What single detail, however, did her screen show in that moment of dissolving passion?

Again he received a pornographic wink from Terry the

exhibitionist. It was a huge snapshot hanging at the level of his eyes, and the inscription on it explained the circumstances: "Taken unawares behind Cromwell's oak at the League's annual Convention, August, 1955." Happy Terry was there re-enacting the boyish innocence of the *Manneken-Pis* from the Brussels fountain.

Since the photographs were difficult to ignore, Alexander willy-nilly had to think about Terry, his club and Dolores's place in his snapshot world. Somehow the wildest of Alexander's fantasies could not accept Terry's fat tummy as an object of pleasure for Dolores. Besides, Terry was always so meticulously undressed.

But how did she come to know him in the first place? She must have known him well enough to get the key to his shabby two-room flat somewhere off Kilburn station. Alexander had not noticed the name of the street, because she drove fast, but he vaguely remembered passing by a row of dingy furniture shops while the street corners flickered by. It was a warm day, very warm for the last week in March, and now the two windows rattled behind the bleached curtains, letting in a breeze and the noise of traffic.

Dolores, he observed, was proud of her irresponsible crazy friends, as she fondly called them, and she certainly enjoyed shocking her diplomatic habits by a little admixture of shabbiness. One thing she could not take, however, was dirt, and she had aired and dusted Terry's automuseum for some time before she risked undressing in his kitchenette-cum-bedroom. Alexander tried to observe their mutual taboos, and did not venture into questions which might spoil their splendid ignorance of each other.

He would rather hear her talk spontaneously of Ela and

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her bored lover, of the flats that were likely to crop up: such things as she chose to mention belonged to the theatrical equipment of their love. Ela and the rest of them stood outside their dual isolation like amusing dummies, or a supporting cast which gave a comic relief to their dramatic parts.

With Terry it was quite different. Alexander had doubts whether he could ever be entrusted with the smallest part, even very far off-stage. He simply would not do in their supporting cast. On a gloomy day Terry's photographs alone might put Alexander off love-making, and this surely was sufficient ground for further inquiries.

Dolores was combing her hair. Alexander pointed to the walls and risked a question.

"Where is this character now?"

"Terry?" Dolores did not turn her head away from the mirror, but he watched her expression from a distance.

"Yes, Terry." He loathed the silly name.

"He's at the Club in the country. Terry is running it, you know."

"Which club?"

"I forget the name. Something to do with trees. It's a nudist club, of course."

Alexander did not like her 'of course' at all. He suspected her of visiting the place, but had to observe their non-interference code by not asking any more questions. Dolores, however, in her post-copulation mood was feeling talkative and went on about Terry and his ridiculous Cromwellian oaks. She said she liked sunbathing in the nude and she did not mind mixed company in the least. She was progressive and nudists were progressive, and Terry, crazy as he was, really had progress on his mind.

"He's an art photographer," she added, loyal to the last bit of nonsense. "And he gets many prizes. He exhibits a lot, you know."

Alexander surveyed the walls and muttered:

"He certainly does."

"But Terry is terribly intelligent. You know what they say about him?" Dolores had her impish look and waited for Alexander to encourage her gossip.

"What do they say?" He stressed 'they' to show that he thought them a very impersonal lot.

"Well, Terry is apparently an authority on the inhibitions of Lesbians."

Here he noticed again that Dolores, who was almost Puritan in her choice of vocabulary when it concerned their love, would readily talk about other people's sexual oddities and tease him indirectly by doing so.

"Your Terry does seem a queer kettle of fish."

Dolores missed the idiom, but hit on a chance joke.

"Terry is a queer all right," she said.

When they were back in her car, driving through the dismal streets of Kilburn, Alexander tempted Dolores to a trial that might uncover for him more links between her eroticism and that of Terry and Ela.

"Why don't we spend a whole night together? We haven't done it yet."

"No, we haven't," she answered quietly.

"In a week's time then?" he said, trying to crack a joke against himself. And he loved her then for the generosity of all her instinctive reactions. He knew she would willingly accept any trial.

Dolores, however, resorted to her practical tone. Her English became subdued.

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"In a week or a fortnight, if circumstances permit. But not later than the twenty-third of April."

Alexander guessed at once what the date meant. The married taboo was due to return home. From the capital. Yes, he could just imagine that South American extravagance in stone and glass: *la capital*.

TWO

In order to create a similar illusion of space around himself Alexander was forced to invent Commander Shrimp. Dolores had so far filled the gap between their secluded reality and the reality of other people by introducing Alexander to Terry, Ela, Ela's lover, and Ela's husband. The introductions were, of course, indirect, but the existence of the characters could be proved within the tangible walls of their flats.

It was time for Alexander to bring one of his puppets on to their stage, and he hit on the commander-type who could be made as flexible and stretchable as a rubber toy.

A psychologist would, no doubt, think this particular choice highly significant: the Commander in Alexander's anecdotes represented, as it were, the suppressed image of his own spying self. For Commander Shrimp had all the popular accessories of the secret trade; he was a once-famous intelligence officer, now retired, who still took up tricky jobs to help the dear old country. Shrimp's war-time hobby happened to be inventions, and very idiosyncratic they all were. Moreover, he loved disguises, this last

addition being a special flavour for Dolores's appreciation.

And for her sake, too, Alexander consciously overplayed the fantastic side of Shrimp's intelligence work. This was to please her foreign idea of the eccentric British, he thought, and Commander Shrimp was just the fellow to behave like an ass while danger hung overhead. Dolores listened to all this fuzzy nonsense, rewarding him with generous giggles which, once started, affected her driving with a fitful recklessness.

"Tell me again about Shrimp in the clouds, please, Alexander." Like a child, she preferred to hear the same story with a few new details embroidered freely each time. And she pouted her large sensuous mouth as if to encourage him with a promise of kisses.

"Well now, let me see——" Alexander lit a cigarette for her. "Shrimp was in retirement when the Jerry war broke out, but later, when the raids kept him awake every night, he grew restless and took up his old hobby."

Dolores inhaled and made an approving gesture with the cigarette in her left hand. She drove fast along the Embankment.

"We were short of bombers just then," Alexander continued, "so Shrimp had to do the impossible. As a rule, he preferred to do either the impossible or nothing at all."

"Just like me, Alexander. You know, I do nothing all the year round, then out of the blue I invent the impossible, and here we are, you and me. Alexander, you look so handsome in my car." She inhaled again.

"Well, Shrimp invented things in much the same way. He cut across irrelevant possibilities and aimed straight at the unique solution."

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She laughed and the car skidded at the turning with a splash of water from a puddle.

"Shrimp's unique solution lay in the clouds. You see, there they were, he thought, every night, humming and droning and booming across the sky—hundreds of German planes over London—while we had so very few. One morning just after sunrise Commander Shrimp felt rather chilly in his bed and he cursed the whole beastly business. 'Oh, blast them! I hope they'll freeze up there, wings, air-screws and all.' As soon as he had uttered this, his invention popped out of his head like a firework. He was astounded by his own genius. The thing was very simple really. All he had to do was to freeze the clouds at the appropriate height while those beasts were overhead. With dive-bombers it would be even easier. Now imagine, Dolores, one night the humming and the droning suddenly stopped dead, and there inside the high clouds the bombers were frozen just like metal toys in huge lumps of ice."

"And at that moment Shrimp was putting his wig on," Dolores interrupted, anxious that the dressing up should not be omitted.

"Oh yes, he put his white wig on, and the eighteenth-century costume, of course. He climbed up as high as the frozen clouds."

"How did he climb up, Alexander?"

"That's another of Shrimp's inventions. It's still on the secret list. Very hush-hush."

"Oh! ——" Dolores exclaimed, and hid her pursed lips behind a thick puff of smoke.

"Anyway," he said, leaning towards her as the car turned with a screech. "Anyway," he repeated, "Shrimp

knocked on the frozen window of the first German plane he encountered on his way up, and saw two blue noses and two blue mouths glued to the small opening. Their breath had melted a bit of the frosty surface, and the men looked hard at the apparition outside. Striding within the cloud, Shrimp assumed an artistic pose just like Mozart's monument in Vienna. Then the Germans managed to clamber out, and as soon as they did so, Shrimp whistled a tune from *Don Giovanni*—which one I can't tell you, Dolores, I'm not musical."

"Never mind, neither am I," said Dolores.

"'*Wir sind schon im Himmel,*' shouted the Jerries, 'that's *der heilige* Mozart in his monumental person. Let's follow him *sofort,*' they said. And they even helped Commander Shrimp to pull all the planes down to the ground."

"But how, Alexander?"

"Sh—sh, Dolores, this, too, is on the secret list. The Russians are doing a lot of freezing experiments these days, you understand."

"Oh yes, I understand. Please go on."

The car skidded on the wet surface, and the first trees in the park appeared, still shedding raindrops in the wind.

"Well, the German pilots he captured became the meekest, the most angelic of all the prisoners of war, their bombers were repainted and flown again, but this time by British airmen. And Shrimp went on turning all those dull English clouds into refrigerators. You can understand now why he hasn't got a fridge at home. Shrimp still lives in the clouds, you might say."

"Did he always wear disguise on his jobs, Alexander?" She drove off the main road in the park and halted by a

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pond. In other cars along the water bored couples read newspapers, smoked or just gaped at the sheds on the bank opposite. The new arrivals disturbed them a little, for they brought love to the afternoon's drizzly leisure.

Alexander kissed Dolores behind her ear and the newspapers in the nearest cars were raised discreetly to prevent boredom from seeing love. He whispered into her ear:

"Oh, frequently. Didn't I tell you, Dolores, about Shrimp dressed up as Lili Marlene?"

"No, you didn't." Her black eyes goggled. She was impressed by the possibilities of this new fantasy.

"I'll tell you about it, then." Alexander smiled and handed her a cigarette. "Well, it was later in the war, when the Germans had installed very big guns along the French coast and were shelling our southern towns. One of those guns became a real nuisance. It was the biggest, the deadliest and the noisiest, and that's why the Jerries adored it, calling the monster Ur-Magda. At that time Shrimp was taking a short holiday in Kent and couldn't stand the beastly thing. Ur-Magda kept him awake day and night. His inventive brain began to tick like a time-bomb; it ticked and ticked until he knew exactly what had to be done. *Pyroplastic* was the obvious answer, and all Shrimp needed to do was to invent it."

"Clever Shrimp," said Dolores.

"As a matter of fact, he was rather clever with pyroplastic."

"What's pyroplastic, Alexander?"

"A sort of plastic which resists the greatest heat; a fire-proof clothing material, you might call it."

"Can one wear it, really?" Dolores looked pleasingly credulous.

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"Shrimp could. I haven't heard of anyone else wearing pyroplastic since. You see, it's purely a war invention, not fit for everyday use. The thing resists high pressure as well; it can't be blown to bits either, so it's quite unique, you understand."

"In fact, your commander invented the impossible once more."

"Yes, Dolores, the impossible. So much so, that there's no need to keep it on the secret list. It's secret-proof, you might say."

"Splendid!" Dolores exclaimed. "I must have invented the same sort of thing for our love without knowing that it was Shrimp's pyroplastic."

"But he wore it, Dolores. He really did, when he decided to go across the Channel."

"Why did he go there?"

"To photograph Ur-Magda, of course. From all sides, and inside too. He asked to be dropped by parachute. And our Intelligence said they would drop him about a mile away from the site. You see, they knew Shrimp wasn't much of a walker. His feet would hurt him if he had to cover a longer distance. But the wind changed suddenly, and the plane with Shrimp in it was blown off course, just about a mile. He jumped, and soon found himself sitting astride something cool, smooth and very solid."

"No!" Dolores cried out, and reached for a cigarette.

"Yes, Dolores, it was Ur-Magda all right. Shrimp was sitting astride the gun, his pyro-camera hidden under his pyroplastic blouse. He looked so sweet with all that pyro-blond hair falling on to his shoulders, and his pyroplastic garters thrilled the German soldiers even more than his

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unexpected fall from the night sky. '*Was ist das?*' they asked one another, and laughed. Shrimp whistled *Lili Marlene* and the gunners understood at once. '*Heil Goebbels!*' they shouted, for any fool could see—and they were all fools—that it was efficient propaganda, a tremendous boost for the morale of the tired soldier in the front line."

"Did they like his dress?"

"Certainly. But they liked Shrimp's whistling even more. They joined him and whistled away happily, while he took nice little snapshots of the gun and the whole site, including the major who had Hitler's moustache. Then, as the noise grew louder, Shrimp managed to get inside the muzzle, snapped a few photographs in the dark there, and patiently waited for the final send-off.

"I don't understand, Alexander."

"It's really quite simple. Once his mission was completed, he had to return home. His plan, of course, had taken this last difficulty into consideration."

"How did he do it?"

"They did it for him, Dolores."

"Who?"

"The German gunners. Naturally, at first they were surprised that Lili Marlene had vanished into the dark sky just as she had dropped down from it. But later they had to do their routine jobs. So at 4 a.m. they fired old Shrimp back to England."

"No!" she said, stubbing the cigarette out.

"Yes, Dolores. That's precisely why this pyroplastic invention was so useful all round. Neither Shrimp nor his camera could be blown to bits. He returned promptly and the photographs proved extremely informative. In

fact, they silenced old Ur-Magda for ever. And Shrimp was able to take another short holiday in Kent. He slept much better this time."

"I bet he did," said Dolores.

The odd thing was that the Commander did exist. Like most inventive artists, Alexander had to rely on a model, and he had picked on a pathetic character who pestered him at the Club with tedious espionage stories. His real name sounded less picturesque: Commander Pennyworth-ing, R.N.V.R.

Whether or not Commander Pennyworth-ing had ever served in the Navy was immaterial; nobody believed a word he said. But Alexander suspected that the old chap had actually done some intelligence work in the remote past and lived on semi-charity ever since. As if to prove his existence outside Alexander's fantasies, Shrimp materialised in his aged flesh, and quite suddenly. He emerged at about noon from one of the milk-bars in Leicester Square and walked straight into Alexander.

"Why, it's Mr. Arnin! Isn't it?"

"Yes. But how strange to see you, Commander."

His shrimp eyes had not lost their beady glint; his skin was reddish and crinkled as before.

"Back from one of your interesting expeditions, Mr. Arnin?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. From Central America. Glad to be in London again, though."

"I am sure you are, Mr. Arnin."

"We must have a drink together, Commander. At the Club perhaps."

"Don't often go to the rotten old place. Too many common people, you understand, Mr. Arnin."

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"I'll give you a ring then and we'll fix something, Commander."

"Rather ring you up, old boy. Moved to the country to write that book, you understand. Up in town only for a day."

"I'll wait for your call then, Commander."

Pennyworth bulged the famous shrimp eyes at Alexander, his bedraggled coat and umbrella silently begging for a loan.

"D'you happen to have change for a pound on you, Arnin?" Saying this, he fumbled for a bank-note, but his torn pockets refused to yield the secret. "Where the deuce have I put it?" His shrimp eyes surpassed themselves in looking positively horrific.

Arnin pressed two ten-shilling notes into Pennyworth's hand, and reminded him of the promised telephone call.

"Should be in town next Tuesday," Shrimp mumbled, "to see my crook of a lawyer about that book, you understand. I'll give you a ring about eleven."

"Do that, Commander."

Old Pennyworth trotted past the cinema, trailing his umbrella; he looked back discreetly and dived into a milk-bar with remarkable agility. So this was the super-agent Shrimp, a puppet with many strings to pull. Alexander wondered how he would play Dolores's pet game next time. The next time came the following day. She asked him:

"Aren't you curious to know why Ela's flat is free?"

"Yes—why?" Now he waited for a puppet to pop out from her box of fantasies.

"You remember Edmundo?" she said. Edmundo was

the name of Ela's lover. "Yes, you remember him. Ela wanted to have a quiet place in the country. She went on and on about it, I remember. In the end Edmundo got a manor cheap from a bankrupt pantomime comic. It's in Buckinghamshire, I think. Anyway, they're moving in this week-end. Ela was terribly happy about it when she rang me up last night."

"Where is Ela's husband?" Alexander asked out of habit.

"Oh, he's with them, of course. As a matter of fact, he went there two days earlier to hang wallpaper in the only Tudor bedroom Edmundo got in his manor. Ela wouldn't trust Edmundo with wallpaper or anything of that sort, you know. He's born for love only, Ela says."

Alexander laughed, and she leant on his arm as she stepped into her shoes. The mirror showed her thighs hardening in that movement.

"You've heard about Terry's success?" Dolores went on. It was a childish thing to say: where else could he possibly hear about Terry's activities? He did not belong to a nudist club, and the only hobby he despised was photography.

"No, I haven't, Dolores. Tell me."

She wiped off a faint smudge of lipstick from his neck, smiled to herself and plunged into the Terry nonsense, which she knew, would slightly irritate Alexander.

"He's achieved his life's ambition, you know. They've elected him president of the Open-Air Amalgamation of British and Allied Nudists. This Allied thing got stuck to the name during the war when lots of friendly foreigners, as Terry says, wanted to relax in the nude after all those beastly air-raids. Terry was a conchie, of course, and still

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is; he loves the body, that's why he's so violent about pacifism. You know, I am sure, what a conchie is."

"I know, Dolores."

"So, you see, Terry must be quite intelligent to be elected to such a high post. Moreover, he told me on the phone he would get a salary for it as well. That's good, because with all those prizes for his art photography Terry is always short of money. Must be the boys: he has expensive tastes in everything, you know."

"Well, good for old Terry," said Alexander.

Dolores had perfect manners in bed and out of bed; she encouraged Alexander to contribute his amusing bit to their leisurely conversation.

"Tell me," she said, "how is our friend the Commander these days? Any news from him?"

"Well, Dolores, I happened to meet Shrimp the other day, in Leicester Square. He came out of a milk-bar. Incredible though it may seem, there are quite a few milk-bars in Leicester Square."

Dolores shook her head; she was not a little girl to be taken in so easily.

"Alexander, you'd better tell me again about Shrimp in the clouds."

"But he's to ring me up on Tuesday. Cross my heart, Dolores."

"You mustn't cross your heart for a white lie, you mustn't. It might bring bad luck to both of us."

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THREE

He loved her like an inspired pedant, and would go on loving her to the last query in his mind. The present query persisted in sharpening his emotions: what was Dolores probing into, before his very eyes? What was she trying to tell him through the costumes of pornography? Should he get down to it, and examine her passion with a spy's pedantry?

There would be no intrusions from outside. Neither society nor duty in work could disturb his study of Dolores, for their love had enough leisure to remain in isolation. Like the heroes of romantic tales, they had no jobs to be prosaically worried about; they could afford emotional energy to concentrate on themselves alone; and nothing uses up more energy than self-absorption.

Alexander, however, forgot about those everyday intrusions which were part of modern comfort; he forgot about the telephone and the door-bell.

One morning, just after seven, the postman rang the bell, and Alexander hobbled to the door, one of his slippers falling off his foot. He tried hard to look less sleepy as he muttered "Good morning."

"Is Miss Kira Pinski living at this address, sir?"

The postman used Kira's maiden name, but Alexander was too sleepy to show surprise. He lied without a moment of hesitation.

"Yes, she's living here. What is it?"

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"I have a registered letter for Miss Pinski. Will you please sign the slip, sir?"

Alexander took the postman's pencil and signed his name illegibly. He received a few letters and a postcard. The postcard and the registered letter were for Kira, both addressed to her maiden name. At first Alexander did not take much notice of either.

He hobbled back to his camp-bed, tried to sleep more, but a telephone call woke him up completely. Some American with whom, out of boredom, he had drunk a bottle of whisky at Lisbon Airport, wanted to repeat the experience in London, and Alexander knew to his sorrow that for this stranger he had already become his London contact. He accepted the invitation, jotted the time in his diary and got up to make himself some coffee. He ate his meals out and never had a proper breakfast. Black coffee was enough.

When he looked at his mail, the postcard attracted his attention. It was sent to Kira from Sicily, and instead of the usual greetings had a drawing of a bull sniffing at a flower. The drawing struck him as feeble and he tore the postcard into small bits. This was the way he always tore things up, not to leave any legible pieces.

After destroying the card he took a good look at the registered letter. The address on it was exactly the same, but written in capital letters. Whatever he thought of Kira now, he still felt a little sentimental about her name, her Jewish origin and the early years of their marriage. He fingered the envelope for a while and noticed the postmark, with the date and the name of the town faintly imprinted. The town was Palermo.

As he had destroyed the postcard, he wanted to do the

same with the letter. But something hard met his fingers as he tried to fold the envelope before tearing it up. The small object was not easy to guess by touch; it must have been wrapped up in something soft like a piece of cotton-wool before being put in with the letter.

Alexander propped the unopened envelope against the coffee-pot and started to read a morning paper. When he went out to meet the American, he left the letter from Sicily on the kitchen table. He forgot about it soon.

Yet the first thing he saw on entering his study at night was the letter again. The woman who cleaned his house and did the washing-up every other day, must have brought it from the kitchen and put it in this prominent place on the mantelpiece. Alexander fingered the envelope absent-mindedly, felt the hard object inside, and decided that out of discreet respect for Kira's memory he should destroy it.

The American's whisky still bubbled in his stomach, making him both morbid and sentimental; like a maniac he walked around his camp-bed, whistling Kira's favourite waltzes. Then, quite suddenly, he thought of how he should best dispose of the registered letter. With a spy's drunken ingenuity he chose destruction by fire, and a strong fire at that, so that the mysterious little object might melt in it.

The only snag was that open fires were no longer kept in the house, and now, at the beginning of April, the weather had turned surprisingly mild. Alexander, however, would not give up his idea so easily. He remembered the stoves. Kira had a Central-European mania for heating every conceivable corner of their enormous villa, and during his absence had had anthracite stoves installed in

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her bedroom and bathroom, in the two music-rooms upstairs and even in the largest lavatory. Alexander hated these iron bulldogs, and slept and ate away from them.

The nearest anthracite stove stood in Kira's bedroom, and this one he was going to use. In the misty light of a whisky-fumed judgment, the stoking of the beastly thing with anthracite at half-past one in the morning seemed a simple and natural task. Alexander grabbed a torch from the kitchen, rushed to the back of the house, opened the coal-shed and returned gasping, with a bucketful of anthracite.

Quietly he stepped into Kira's bedroom, a torch in one hand and the bucket in the other. This prevented him from switching on the light at once, and now he was not very keen on seeing the whole room brightly illuminated. His movements became methodical, as if he were doing one of his youthful jobs, with gloves, master-keys and the rest.

First, he carefully spread a layer of fuel inside the stove, placed the letter on it, and put more anthracite on top. Then he emptied Kira's cigarette-lighter, which he spotted lying by the stove, and lit the whole pyramid. Flames sprang up and he closed the stove firmly.

For a good quarter of an hour Alexander sat on the floor facing the stove and listened to its grumbling. Behind him shadows performed a slithering dance along the walls, for his and the fire's pleasure. All this made him drowsy and he nearly committed a post-mortem sacrilege by sleeping on Kira's bed. But his torch was fading, and he left the room quickly to go and fall on to his uncomfortable bed in the study.

The American's whisky did its best to give him a heavy,

dreamless night. In fact, he overslept. The camp-bed creaked as Alexander jumped out just before ten. He did not bother to make coffee. It was late and he drank some milk instead. And then, while shaving, he recalled the stove, the torch and the letter. Had he by any chance dreamt it all? He must make sure before going out.

He pressed the door-handle very gently as he always did when she stayed in bed after a severe attack. On opening the door he faced Kira's bed, neatly made and very white in the light from the window. Now he had his assurance: a wave of tepid air reached him from the corner. The stove was still warm.

He had forgotten that she always kept his photograph by her bed. It was still there, in a rather ostentatious frame, probably made of real silver. Alexander approached the bedside table and looked at his own face, touched up all round and glossy. Ever since his experience with Terry's auto-portraits, he had become more aware of the momentariness of one's own identity in photographs and snapshots.

This, for instance, was supposed to be his best likeness. Kira had said so over and over again. It had been taken, he remembered, two years after their marriage, when they were still travelling together, poor Kira from time to time getting stuck in some unheard-of tourist spot, while he hurried things up to be back with her before the rains or the dusty drought. She wanted to look at his face during those regular absences, so one day he had gone to an Italian photographer in Montevideo, posed like a cinema-struck adolescent for nearly an hour, and finally received the beautified result, much enlarged and almost radiating in the southern sun. Kira loved it.

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He really looked quite striking. But because the camera belonged to an Italian, his features had assumed the sweet expression of an apologetic Valentino, which was precisely what endeared the photograph to Kira. What interested Alexander in it now, years after that momentous click of the camera, was the spy's ambivalent personality. It could be pinned down from time to time, like a butterfly, but the whole personality eluded the pursuer in the end.

He looked closer at the photograph. Admittedly, it did not falsify his face, but neither did it catch its full character. His hair was still dark, and his nose still very narrow, yet the Italian sweetness had gone, probably five minutes after the camera's click. How convenient this mimicry was, and how repetitive. In Greece, Alexander could pass for a Greek from nowhere in particular; in Turkey for a Turkish immigrant; in Chile for a native of Irish ancestry, and in Ireland for an Anglo-Irishman.

Alexander enjoyed his sojourns in England, because here at last he could be his own ambiguous self, giving his adaptable mind a rest; only in England did he sometimes dare to let the spy out of his system, and the spy relaxed in the open. On one condition, however: he had to satisfy his basic need for isolation.

He turned away from the photograph and his eyes fell on the rug between the bed and the stove. Just at the edge of it he noticed Kira's stick. There was something about that polished piece of wood that caused panic in his mind. He left the room, walked up to the telephone in his study and waited.

Punctually at eleven he dialled Dolores's number, heard her voice, put the receiver down and quickly dialled once more. According to his map and the day of the week, she

would join him at the wine-bar off Regent Street. He had to hurry to be there before her. On the way to the nearest taxi-rank he bought a packet of cigarettes for her. One of his habits at least was functioning smoothly. At the first sign of absent-mindedness Alexander would believe himself seriously ill.

Dolores arrived only a minute after him; she had mastered the intricacies of his map. A glass of Marsala was waiting for her.

She never failed to respond to the changes in his mood. Something must have struck her in the expression of his eyes when he had greeted her, for she soon caught his restlessness.

"Let's get out of here. It's sunny outside. Do you like my new coat? Let's go, I'll drive you round the park."

Alexander agreed, paid for the drinks and walked out into the windy street. The sun was sharp and made her profile look like a lucid outline painted on glass. It also brought out the full colour of her coat.

"It's an unusual shade of purple," he said and took her arm.

"Goes well with my necklace, doesn't it, Alexander?" She always compared things the other way round. When they reached the car, Alexander automatically glanced at the number-plate of a monstrosity parked next to it.

"Do you recognise this vulgar assembly of tin?" he asked, and quickly memorised the number.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"It has C.D. on the plate."

"Cover it up with one of our spare plates, if it worries you," Dolores was trying to humour him, but he stared blankly at the parking sign.

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"We mustn't come to this wine-bar again. Someone we know may bump into us." He meant, of course, someone Dolores might know.

She shrugged her shoulders and went round to the front of her car. With the sleeve of her new coat she cleaned the windscreen. Alexander was waiting for her to finish. He wondered what other precautions they could possibly take to seal themselves off from their two separate worlds.

In fact, he had fortified his sense of separation by creating a double life for himself. After his chance meeting with Commander Pennyworth, Alexander had begun to cultivate his casual acquaintances in London, to make regular visits to the Club and to be socially available for such birds of passage as the American who could not bear to drink his whisky alone. Alexander moved about, guarding his secret passion, but now he had an environment from which he could escape to Dolores.

And in these new circumstances he developed a taste for secondary pleasures which he had not noticed before. They were there all the time, ready for him, in little unimportant gestures, in his clothes as he put them on, in the altered reflections of his face in the mirror.

Alexander began to experience love's greedy spying after reality. There he was, returning to his average self in between the acts of love, his shoes under a pile of his clothing, a comb thrust in his ruffled hair. In front of him, Ela's bathroom mirror assembled his forgotten reality, confirming his personal objects one by one: the comb, the shirt, the belt and the rest. Never before had he been so aware of his tie's fleeting shimmer, of the weight of his shoes, or of his jacket's length. He felt a weird gratitude towards his socks or sleeves for helping him to make

that slow jump from the bare seclusion of love into the social reality of objects and people.

Yet the memory of love, the lingering presence of its intensity seemed to him like a jet of air sneaking between his gestures, clinging to the suit he was putting on. And the voice of Dolores reaching him through the open door, belonged to the same mixture of sensations: it seemed to call him back, away from his shirt, shoes and tie.

Dolores said:

"Did I ever tell you about Rita?"

"The film-actress?"

"No, my Rita. She's been in films too, but some years ago. Now she's teaching voice production. Just to kill time before her come-back, she says."

"What about her, Dolores?"

"You'll see her place in a week or ten days. It's terribly amusing."

"Why?"

"I mustn't tell you anything more. You'll see for yourself, Alexander."

"I am very intrigued."

"Good. You'll have the whole night to study Rita's place."

"With you as my guide, Dolores?"

"Yes, with me as your guide."

What Alexander really wanted her to do was to play her game of costumes from act to act until he himself could see its meaning. By asking Dolores to be his guide, he was in fact encouraging her to go through systematic pornography for the sake of pure passion.

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FOUR

Rita's flat was not just a peculiar flat: it looked as if it only existed in the dreams of Salvador Dali suffering from an indigestion of images. The chief piece of furniture in it was a wardrobe which stood exactly in the middle of the studio room, a pink bathtub on its left and a tailor's dummy on its right.

Two enormous pictures hung on the walls facing each other across the wardrobe. One, in a yellow frame, showed a room with a huge wardrobe in its middle, and the other, with black lace in lieu of a frame, represented a room possessed by a pink bathtub, a tailor's dummy and a huge wardrobe.

There were no other artistic adornments on the walls, except for a telephone which hung on two wires suspended from the remnant of a picture rail. A shy-looking bulb illuminated the centre of the ceiling, but secret lights crept out in streaks from under the smaller pieces of furniture which for some reason appeared to be quite ordinary.

Dolores behaved like a sophisticated museum guide. She organised a small tour of the studio for Alexander, and gave a short history of each object, with dates and relevant quotations straight from Rita's mouth. And since Alexander had brought his portable tape-recorder with him, she too, was astonished by his contribution to their intimate setting.

"Are you going to interview Rita's wardrobe?" she

asked. "Rita calls it A Girl's Practical Wardrobe."

"No, I won't interview it, Dolores. But we may get inspired in the middle of the night or at dawn, and feel like improvising a monologue, a poetic monologue, I hope."

"A monologue addressed to what?"

"I don't know. To anything that inspires you or me."

"This bed, for instance?" Saying this, Dolores pressed a knob in the centre of the wardrobe, and an iron thing began to come down like a drawbridge; on reaching the floor, it rested its paws not far from Alexander's feet. The bed formed the lower half of the wardrobe's door, but when it was out, it resembled a gigantic drawer filled with pillows and eiderdowns.

Alexander was speechless and very much impressed. The thing had emerged from the bowels of the wardrobe, and like a landscape of Salvador Dali would probably end in the nightmare of a horizon.

"Has anyone slept in it, Dolores?"

"But of course. It's Rita's bed; she couldn't sleep anywhere else. It's all deeply psychological, you know, but I mustn't tell tales. Rita is a real Amazon, and whatever she means by that, a normal bed can't be right for an Amazon."

"Where is she sleeping tonight?"

"She isn't. She has to talk very seriously with one of her friends. She's a Russian."

"Who—Rita?"

"No, her friend. They will talk all night. They must."

In reply Alexander shoved the tape-recorder under Rita's bed: a gesture silencing the very possibility of monologues. And Dolores clambered into the bed. She looked up and saw the magnificent wardrobe above like a moun-

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tain spanning a tunnel. After making this comparison, she flung her shoes out, then her skirt, but as she was unbuttoning her striped blouse, laughter seized her body. She lay on her back, sending a cascade of sounds into the room, and the two stern pictures seemed to absorb her gaiety.

Alexander realised that the trial he wanted her to undergo had begun for her in that sudden outburst of laughter.

"What's so funny?" he asked, struggling with his jersey. He could not yet imagine himself lying there under those layers of shelves, like a Gulliver chained to the bottom of a beehive.

"I've just remembered a cupboard; mind you, nothing as big as this monumental piece. I was only five or six; no! less than six. Definitely. I still had a parrot then, called Lolita. And our house in San Antonio must have been in the process of redecoration or something like that, because everything was upside-down, furniture cluttered together, and no one knew where to find things." Dolores paused and smiled, while he was still undressing slowly.

"I remember," Dolores went on, "I remember sitting inside a cupboard which seemed to me very big then, and that cupboard stood exactly in the middle of the room where my father died two years later. My father came in and, of course, pretended not to see me. He walked round the cupboard three or four times, called me by all my pet names, and I giggled inside so much that I kicked the wood with my feet. Then he opened the cupboard door very, very slowly, put his head in, and I pinched his nose, choking with spasms of laughter. He pretended to be frightened and tried to run away. But I grabbed his white cuff and squeaked: 'Its only me, *Papaito*, don't be

afraid.' And he said: 'How extraordinary, it is my Dolores! And I wonder whether she still loves me as much as yesterday.' I cried out: 'More, more, more!' and *Papaito* took me in his arms."

Alexander did not interrupt her; she herself had stopped, conscious of his attentive silence and the rising emotion in her voice. For the first time Alexander heard her mention her past, and the way in which she was recollecting the incident fascinated him.

"Please go on," he said and touched her naked arm.

"There's not much more to tell. It all ended with my weeping in the doorway the same evening. I wanted to sleep in the cupboard, and my father wouldn't let me. I wept as much as when Lolita the parrot died suddenly in her cage."

"Do you often think of your childhood?"

"Not often, Alexander."

"Why?" He regretted the swift question at once, but Dolores did not seem to mind it; she merely shook her head and waited for him to kiss her. There was more than denial in the gesture of her head; and after touching her arm with his lips, he sensed that Dolores wanted him to lift the child's emotions from her story and lay them before his love, so that he could cover them with his passion, as legs cover legs.

Whatever image she saw in his bent body, her eyes had no power to name: Alexander suddenly merged with a half-remembered wish of a crying girl, a little girl in love with her father; and as their movements flowed into a rhythm, a still older memory began to regulate it, rocking their bodies like a warm cradle, rocking.

But the grotesque counter-point was all the time in the

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room, close to their enchantment. Rita's bed framed their bodies; they looked in it like a theme for another painting to be hung on the wall above the pink bathtub. The bed continued under the wardrobe's shelves, drawing their bodies into the tunnel-like passage, and twice they reached its end to roll back towards the bed's foot. They travelled on their elbows and knees all over this ridiculous white plain which the slowed-down pace of love made grow into immensity.

The skin rubbed against the folds of sheets and smoothed them out again. Dolores was defiant, allowing magic to mingle with absurdity; she defied him too, testing his attitude to self-mockery. Alexander accepted her daring and challenged it in turn by prolonging each trial, set up like a trap for their bodies.

What they said between the acts seemed pedantically irrelevant to the thoughts which had guided their behaviour. Words resembled feet cautiously stepping over stones, crevices and water; hardly anything was described or named, and since the desires to come could not be guessed, it seemed futile to talk about them.

"Shall we discuss the colour of Rita's bathtub?"

"No, Dolores. Pink, any shade of pink is beyond discussion."

"What a pity," she said and sighed.

Alexander stretched his hand out, felt for a glass and triumphantly lifted it up from the floor.

"Care for more wine, Dolores?"

"A little later perhaps, but I'd like a cigarette."

He lit a cigarette for her and then got out of bed.

"Where's the switch, Dolores?"

"Just under that horrid picture."

ISOLATION

He took one step and the room with the wardrobe-bed vanished in darkness. Only the red glow of the cigarette remained like a star. Alexander walked towards it and sat down on the floor near the bottles, his head just above the level of the bed. Dolores inhaled deeply, and the glow widened for a moment, illuminating her profile. She went on smoking in the hush of darkness, her profile strangely innocent next to the halo of listless light.

He watched the cigarette until its tip stopped glowing. Lazily he leant back and stretched himself out on the floor, his toes touching the cold surface of the bathtub. He heard a rustle, then a brief crackling noise, and a rustle again, coming from above. It could have been mice dancing on the shelves of the wardrobe, but his lips would not open to utter a word. Suddenly it was so quiet that the chimes of a distant clock echoed, it seemed, under the planks of the floor. Eight, nine, ten—and again rustling from above; he lost count.

"There should be a switch inside the wardrobe, just under the second shelf, Rita said. But I can't find it. Give me matches, please."

"Catch!" He threw a box on to the bed without getting up.

"Thank you." And soon a bluish flame flickered, then came a click and the top of the wardrobe was filled with light.

"Do you love this woman?" he heard, but the voice did not come from his tape-recorder. Dolores spoke from the niche of light: "You'd better get up and see what she's like."

Alexander raised himself from the floor, put his hands on the bed and said:

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"Well, well——"

Dolores wore a costume which would have thrilled Terry the president, had it clung as tightly to a pretty wanton boy. It consisted of three sections: the lower, the middle and the semi-upper, each made more scanty by two eye-like openings, but at each end of the design soft contrasts were provided in black fur. This furry touch pointed to a truly grotesque display on the very top: a bushy Cossack cap sat like an arched animal on Dolores's hair, and in spite of its size did not spoil the effect.

Dolores knew that any costume, however fantastic and ridiculous, brought something new out of her flexible beauty. She did not wait for his approval, but only adjusted the cap and said casually:

"Now have a look at Rita's treasures. You must admit they deserve such a wardrobe."

"Well, let me see——" Alexander smiled to appear more amused than surprised.

The bulb hidden in the wardrobe's roof sprinkled misty light on to the row of dresses, old, modern and stylised, vulgar, subtle or pointless, and here and there vaguely bisexual. To Alexander who could not get used to the light, this array of colours, frills and bustles looked like a collection of carcasses, neither human nor animal, but drooping in a convincingly dead manner. The wigs, in particular, seemed moribund, shedding white powder over so well-tailored a *memento mori*.

Alexander climbed into the bed, under all that hanging masquerade, and, catching the expression of her eyes, magnified by the fur cap, he understood the absurd importance of her costume. He would not let her be embarrassed by a merely watchful presence; on the con-

trary, his aim was to try out systematic fetishism, to pile up disguise upon disguise, until she had enough of it.

"Put that wig on, Dolores. No, not the dress. We must invent a really mixed-up costume," he said after he had made love to her again, and the Cossack cap like a tea-cosy now covered a large Chianti bottle. She pointed to a leather jacket, and he nodded.

They both treated this adolescent idea of pornography with utter seriousness, turning it into a puzzle which was composed around a mad assortment of limbs, each element of the puzzle almost sexless by dissociation. Moreover, Dolores used words as if they were ready-made parts of the very same puzzle.

"Shall I paint lips on my knees and eyes on my throat?"

"I'll paint them for you, Dolores. Where is your lipstick?"

He accepted the fetishes she thought up at random and by doing so gave them some purpose; he helped her to guess her own desires by choosing the right dress or embellishment from the crazy collection just above their heads.

He encouraged her to tempt him back to her body. As the night passed by, measuring its clockless time with wine bottles and cigarettes, Alexander probed deeper into her secret passions, separating them one by one from the confusion of sex. Each resolved fantasy was put aside, crumpled and useless like the costumes she tried on. And every new fulfilment left them tired but still drugged, with nerves exposed to the shrill outlines of the air about them, with eyes enlarged and sipping the dark.

Alexander felt he now had cat's pupils and could recognise sharp contours even at the far end of the room, his

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drugged sight painfully receiving the sensations of touch. He was afraid to lean forward, lest his eyelashes hit a hard object and break like splinters. Exhaustion itself became a stimulus; one sense deprived of strength would possess another and show its existence through pain.

More and more Alexander met his own secrets when provoking hers. Always obsessed by the perverse pleasures of isolation, in social life and in love, he now found himself isolating the physical details. He saw her neck only, and the whole pursuit of images suddenly halted, as if hypnotised by this one vision. Then he isolated the entire length of her spine, then her buttocks, finally the hard breasts of her knees.

Through such isolated trials at last they experienced the bitter taste of satiation. Alexander looked into her eyes. He could see them in the darkness, and knew that she also could see his. Dolores lay on her back, wide awake and shivering; and the costumes were about her on the bed or above her in the wardrobe. Perhaps by having inhabited them for a few minutes at least, she had convinced herself that she, Dolores, would never become like any one of them, a drooping carcass topped with an impersonal wig.

Now she was ready to give her toys away. She showered Alexander's body with scarfs, ribbons and shiny trinkets.

"You'll look like a Persian magician," she whispered in childish confidence. "I was once in love with a Persian magician in my big book of fairy-tales. He wore such big ear-rings."

She found a pair of ear-rings among the trinkets, helped him to put them on; placed her necklace on his throat and wound a red scarf round his thigh.

ISOLATION

"I love you," she said, "beyond all this I love you—do you understand?"

"I understand," he answered.

They entered love for the last time that night and felt that by making this desperate trial they were breaking the barrier of sex.

But when Dolores lit a match, she cried out with terror: Alexander was lying on the pillow, his head covered up with black gauze. All his features seemed to be sucked in and absorbed by the gauze. At the sound of her voice he started and the veil dropped from his face on to the sheet. The match went out. And Dolores spoke in the muffled voice of a somnambulist:

"I thought you had no face. It was horrible."

She quickly removed all the trinkets from his body, then her head tilted and she fell asleep.

FIVE

The telephone woke them up. Dolores yawned, slipped on Rita's theatrical coat with golden epaulettes, and stumbled over a bottle near the bathtub. She caught the telephone in time, and this saved her from falling. The wires proved unexpectedly strong.

"Yes, of course, it's me," she said clutching the receiver. "Thank you very much, darling. . . . Yes, Rita, of course. . . . What's the time, by the way?"

Rita, like the telephone clock, gave a precise answer. At the third yawn of Dolores it would be six, two, and fifty

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seconds. Dolores obliged with a very loud yawn. Then she listened, nodding and smiling to the telephone.

"I'll be out in twenty minutes," she said. "Thank you again, Rita. Yes, I love you, too. Yes, very much. Good-bye." She placed the receiver on the suspended contraption, the wires tightened, and the telephone began to sway.

"I gather we have to hurry, Dolores."

"It was Rita," she announced, and yawned.

"Yes, I know."

"That all-night conversation with her Russian friend has exhausted her, she says. And she's freezing now. So she wants to have a bath in her pink tub. Pink is a warm colour, Rita says."

"She's in love with you, you know," Alexander said and began to dress quickly.

"Do you really think so, Alexander?"

At this their dawn dialogue stopped. The water splashed by Dolores made a gurgling noise in the tub, and the faint aura in the window seemed to wobble. Alexander put all the empty bottles into a paper carrier, glanced round the studio, and then managed to get at the tap while Dolores went on washing herself.

"You'd better go first, *querido*," Dolores said. "Rita may turn up any minute. She has no sense of time."

"All right. I'll wait for you by the car. If a barber's shop is open, I'll get a quick shave."

"You won't have time, Alexander. And I shall love every stubbly hair on your chin, I promise."

He went downstairs, groping for the banister, which had a sinister smoothness, and stepped into an April drizzle which did not refresh him. On the contrary, his skin felt like cottonwool soaked in the sky's puddle and

weighing down the circles under the eyes. A cat was miaowing inside a telephone box. Alexander let it out, for which the cat thanked him, brushing against his legs.

Dolores did not appear for some time. Perhaps she was being detained by Rita. He waited patiently not far from her car. Finally she arrived; swaying her loose red coat as she walked. Alexander noticed his tape-recorder which she carried smartly like a make-up box.

"You left it behind," she said. "Sorry to have kept you waiting. But I couldn't resist the temptation."

"What temptation?"

"Well—I've recorded something for you. Funny, it's easier to be uninhibited in front of a machine."

"For me, too. It's usually the other way round. Most people are put off by the microphone."

They looked at each other in the trembling light, and a dense tiredness overcame them like fumes from the still leaking sky. Dolores started the engine.

"Can we get coffee anywhere at this hour?" she asked.

"Let's try Covent Garden. We're not far from it. Turn to the left now."

It was a tasteless brew drowned in overboiled milk that they gulped down at a workers' café near the vegetable market. Porters stared at Dolores and some greeted her with the polite smiles of recognition.

"I bet they take you for Queen Soraya," Alexander whispered.

"I'd better smile back, then." And she did.

At that moment he caught sight of his own expression in a muddy mirror behind Dolores. His nose there looked unnaturally narrow, almost squeezed down to the bone, and the shadow of a beard around his face seemed to com-

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press other features as well. Only his eyes remained wide open, glazed with sleeplessness, a fixed stare like that of a drug-addict coming out of them towards the tottering world of objects. The morning light inflicted pain, it bruised the walls and other people's faces.

Yet, despite this watchful tiredness, Alexander felt peace deep down, under all the layers of skin, below the surface net of nerves. It was a complete absence of erotic awareness, and he liked the emptiness it left within him. A new kind of freedom elevated him to some plane from which he could survey himself as he had been, all his desires scattered across his memory and resembling identical dots on a map.

Perhaps only spirits were privileged to have a view like this, not only of the world as a whole but also of each human map dotted with repetitive passions. But Alexander thought he did not believe in any form of reality that was purer than the physical existence. This sudden analogy with the spiritual awareness of things outside surprised him, but he explained it away as a mere borrowing from literature.

He was curious, however, to see whether Dolores was experiencing a similar state, for which he thought up a provisional name: a sexless state.

Motionless and very pale, Dolores sat on an uncomfortable plywood chair, her black loose waves reflecting in the mirror. What would she say if he now asked her to analyse her own tiredness? Would she even consent to take the risk of describing and naming what to him seemed empty and almost inhuman? Was it right in the first place to interfere with someone else's utmost privacy of exhaustion? Alexander had an uneasy feeling that she, sitting

there with her back to the spotty mirror, sensed both his queries and his doubts.

It was still early when they left the dingy cafeteria and found the car in the company of three black cats. This sight fired a spark in Dolores. She said while accelerating after Trafalgar Square:

"Let's dispose of all those empty bottles. I've just had an idea."

"What is it, Dolores?"

"Look, milkmen are busy delivering bottles to the door steps. We'll add a friendly little touch of originality this morning. But not here. It's not the right sort of district. I'll drive into the April wasteland of Belgravia."

"Oh, no!" Alexander exclaimed. "It's your diplomatic fortress. Some early bird might recognise you."

"No bird will, I assure you. I look simply dreadful. My complexion is blotchy, my eyes are bloodshot, my lips look positively negroid. I am, as you can see, in disguise."

Her voice sounded genuinely happy. She stopped the car, challenged the brave man in Alexander and with his very cautious help began to distribute their empty wine bottles. The square received a fair supply in proportion to the number of milk bottles already left in the porches. Alexander managed to glance at his watch: it was only twenty minutes to eight. With a spy's distrust of ostentatious folly, he deposited his allotment, looked round and took to his heels.

Gasping on the pavement by the car, he suddenly thought of Kira. He could just imagine her running back to remove all the bottles. Jokes should not embarrass other people, she always said; how very improper to make a respectable doctor or a lawyer look a fool in front of his

ACT TWO: COSTUMES

neighbours. Kira was so considerate, especially to the people she neither knew nor cared about.

Back in the car, Dolores and Alexander congratulated themselves on their achievement. Chianti bottles, in particular, struck a gay note of colour among the red and blue hats on metropolitan milk.

Then they drove to the river and the sun hailed them from behind the chimneys. The water was at peace with the wind and the floating rubbish.

Dolores turned her face to him. The face showed all its blemishes in the sun: it oscillated between ugliness and indestructible beauty. Alexander wanted to kiss her, but he could not: he was empty of every desire the body stores up for human vanity and greed.

"No, don't kiss me, Alexander," she said quietly and clasped her hands. "We love each other now beyond our separate pride. And I am so very peaceful there, inside." She rested her folded hands on her lap.

"Yes, I know. Sometimes one is tired of communicating with the body."

"Alexander, this is so relaxing, this complete absence of physical communication, all passion squandered in gambling."

"What did we gamble for, Dolores? Our bodies?"

"Our souls, Alexander. And now your soul is sticking out."

"It's a picturesque way of describing a sensation."

"But I love the sensation, in you and in me."

Two hours later, alone in his study, Alexander switched on the tape-recorder and heard Dolores's voice. It sounded more monotonous, like a recitation:

"When my father died, he was dressed four times before

the funeral. You see, he had held a number of important posts, he was governor and general, and I think he served abroad too, at the peace conference. His body was on view for a couple of days, and they put four different uniforms on him during that time. With medals and ribbons and sashes, and studded belts. I saw the whole masquerade, I was made to. A girl of seven should remember the glory of her father. But on the third day, when I sneaked in, I noticed a black cover on his face. I thought they had cut off his beautiful head, and I fainted. Later they told me that the black kerchief was meant to protect his face from the flies. It was a very hot day when they buried him."

The voice stopped, but Alexander did not move from his chair. Then, after a long pause, he heard Kira's *Beware of sss*. He got up quickly and silenced the machine. A third person had been listening to them, somewhere off stage.

And he felt that he would never play with his pet toy. In this world of interferences even machines can sound haunted.

ACT THREE

Off Stage

ACT THREE: OFF STAGE

ONE

It started with Dolores being suddenly considerate about their chief character off-stage. They were discussing at length the subtleties of scent in a smoky pub on the other side of the river. A girl in jeans had passed by their table on the way to the lavatory, and Alexander threw a rather obvious remark:

"One is always grateful to a woman for wearing perfume in a stuffy place like this." Then he realised that what the girl had just trailed through the air was, in fact, a cheap and sickly imitation of French perfume. Dolores, however, did not allow him to adjust his observation. She was off on one of her favourite subjects.

"You know, you're the first man I have ever heard make an intelligent comment on this invisible jewellery, as I call it. By the way, have you noticed how often I change my perfume?"

Alexander made a quick calculation in his head, but when he said it, Dolores put her hand on his shoulder and smiled to show that she was flattered by the attempt.

"No, not as often as that. What, for instance, am I wearing now?" She probed further into his ignorance.

"Chanel Number 5?" He pleaded guilty with his puzzled look, but in his mind he filed a quick memo: study perfume industry in the second week of May; French, Italian and South American; sort out the numbers

of Chanel; drop 5 altogether. It was shocking how ignorant spies could get.

Dolores enjoyed giving him little morsels of information, partly because Alexander still amazed her by being able to answer most of her questions, and the questions jumped from subject to subject. Now she could impress and amuse herself in one go:

"You know," she said, "everybody, simply everybody gives me Chanel Number 5, for Christmas, my birthday, all sorts of anniversaries and the national day as well. I never use the scent; it's too much in the air, you know."

"What are you wearing then today? Tell me."

"*Estupendo*; it's a Bolivian product. Very rare, and quite something. Kiss me behind the ear and you'll see."

Alexander first glanced at the barmaid, who was engrossed in her nose and picked it savagely, then he looked at the lavatory door: the girl in jeans took her time, she was still there. Slowly he bent over Dolores's neck and kissed the back of her ear. It had a soft petal-like surface and the perfume suggested a mixture of exotic flowers which he remembered used to intoxicate him into sleep late at night when he could not get himself drunk on whisky in the tropical nowhere.

"Yes, I know this fragrant killer, Dolores. It's strong and it clings. Someone the other day must have smelt it on me. I got a surprised stare all right."

"What perfume does she wear?" Dolores clasped her hands as she always did when she wanted to pass over an uncertain mood with laughter or seriousness.

"Who?" He was disorientated by this unexpected leap in their chatter. Almost at once he guessed her intention,

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but could not think of the simplest word to show he had understood.

"Find out at home," Dolores went on relentlessly, avoiding the proximity of the taboo with all her feminine skill.

"I will," he answered simply and cursed himself for not being stupid enough or honest enough to let her surmise the truth about Kira. All that time Dolores had her painfully loyal expression.

The ridiculous promise started the trouble. He was now to find the trail of Kira's scent. He remembered one of his Mexican guides explaining to him the difference between the dead and the living trails. Ghosts were cunning, he had said, and erased every imprint they made with their feet, but they could not hide their scent. The living had no lasting odour to deposit on bushes and stones, but they left deep traces in the sand and clay. The Mexican peasant had claimed that the scent of ghosts was less misleading to follow.

So he followed up Dolores's hint the same afternoon. The white walls of Kira's bedroom absorbed the meagre daylight and were refusing the entry of dusk. He could therefore see very clearly all the small objects neatly arranged on her dressing-table. Alexander spotted the scent bottle at once. Bulging out in the middle, it looked like one of those ancient ointment flagons, and its colour was dark blue. When he opened it and raised it to his nostrils the inside exuded an unmistakable smell of decaying plants, which he associated with stagnant pools of water in the marshes. Perhaps the Mexican in his superstitious belief had grasped the evaporating essence of death: this was certainly the dead odour of memory.

Alexander peered inside and noticed white specks at the

bottom like sediment, but not a drop of perfume was left. The specks moved and a circular line appeared. When the eye got used to the white within the blue, he identified the thing as a rolled-up piece of paper. He fished it out with nail-scissors, unfolded and read: "You will love me until this scent dries up." The letters were shaky but large, each 't' looming like miniature gallows. These gallows belonged to Kira's hand.

There was no point even in questioning his memory: he had not bought her this bottle of scent. Like every responsible husband he always gave Kira Chanel Number 5 and each time she said he could not have made a better choice.

The barrier of death is perversely similiar to the ultimate barrier of sex: it divides fear from utter peace and inspires trust in the person who has passed it. Kira still inspired that trust, and though Alexander had conveniently removed her to the chilly mortuary of his conjugal taboo, he had no wish to re-interpret their common past. It was fixed and could stay like a family portrait on the wall, gathering venerable dust.

Now his professional curiosity began to tick. He recognised this clock-like movement of thoughts: little ones running fast round his head and the slower marking the separate points of his inquiry. But what was the real reason for such an inquiry, and why inquire at all? Kira as Miss Pinski and Kira his wife did not yet enter into his central interest. He was rather pursuing the emotion in him which had produced that trust in the dead, intellect charging the past for preserving this naivety.

Alexander took the blue bottle in his hand again, but the way he handled it now showed an expert at work. He

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quickly examined the glass, its colouring, the trade mark under the name and smelt the fragrant emptiness inside. Kira's note occupied less of his attention: he pocketed it for further analysis.

His eyes went round the dressing-table in search of oddities, found none, and returned to the place where the bottle stood. A dry mark of ink was visible through the spilled powder which remained untouched by a duster. Alexander connected the two marks and asked himself whether Kira had kept her fountain-pen in the drawer where her powder was. The drawer had no key, so he pulled it out and saw the pen on a stack of blue sheets, all scribbled over in Kira's large handwriting. He moved closer to the window, sat on a low stool and dealt with the contents of the drawer.

He had taught Kira to be methodical and now he could enjoy the benefits of his lessons, for the sheets were arranged according to dates, each long letter held together with a clip. The letters should have moved him, because they were all addressed to him. But Alexander had a job to do, and the job demanded keen scrutiny.

After a few minutes he saw the whole pattern clearly: dear hesitant Kira could not decide on the right tone of emotion when she wrote to him during those months of her on-and-off sickness. So she composed three or four versions each time, according to her family models, and the moods corresponded to them.

In one version he was invoked from the temporary depth of depression as a paternal authority, the more paternal for being so far away and so very busy. In the second, the tone lacked all reverence from the opening line, and the same distant Alexander was treated like a

Viennese *Spitzbube* chasing every skirt in an altogether irresponsible part of the world. Whenever a third version survived this wavering process of selection, Kira was suddenly full of maternal premonitions, and Alexander could only marvel at the way she had managed to transfer herself into his sweating skin in the heat of Central America.

But why had she kept the whole record of her affectionate hesitations? Richer food for speculation awaited him between two brotherly letters written one after the other but not sent. It was a typed account, with figures, place names and dates, some lines in it underlined in red.

Alexander jumped up from the stool, switched on the light above the mirror and spread the sheet on the table. "The Province of Las Monjas," it read; "population 567,000; concealed airport to be built before 1965; interested companies——" and here followed a list of names with addresses. Bribes were estimated in a separate column. He had to concentrate well and quickly in order to assess the compromising character of the document before him; this was more important than his present feelings about Kira who, judging by this digest, was either a careless maniac or a self-taught adept at his art.

Two other things made this little domestic find rather disturbing: the word *Copy*, underlined in red, leered at Alexander from the top corner of the sheet, and below, between the typed lines, prettily shaped dates bounced up and down, catching some words with pencil-made loops. At first the dates did not strike him as relevant to the facts with which they were linked so graphically, but then his own memory turned a few splendid somersaults above the text and he saw another pedant's genius greeting him from the document.

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The dates between the lines referred to the dates of the letters which he had sent to Kira from various points during his long journey. She had collated the facts with the stages of his actual progress in the field. This was truly remarkable.

Alexander began a methodical search of all the drawers in the bedroom. He put the upper lights on and finally, with an armful of bits and pieces, he collapsed on to Kira's bed. The mattress whimpered in a horribly unctuous manner.

Alexander behaved like an occupying army, his regard for sacred privacy and past sentiments being as negligible as the prospects of eternal peace. He had a very tiresome job on hand, in his own house, and in the middle of a spy's holiday.

At last a clue slid out from among Kira's sketches; most of them he noticed with glee were slashed with thick pencil lines. It was the photograph of a very young man whose starry eyes wooed a host of angelic lovers, but whose mouth plainly asked for pastries with a lot of cream. Alexander imagined the blue perfume bottle next to this face and at once decided that mummy's pretty boy could not afford it or think of saving up for it with the help of his clay pig. Unless, of course, Kira had given him the money to buy the present and tie it up with a charming ribbon of surprise.

But even that possibility Alexander ruled out on second thoughts. Kira liked her presents to be proper presents; only when she gave hers was pretence permitted to honour the memory of Papa's birthdays. She had a special allowance for those little birthday gifts.

Nevertheless, the large and starry-eyed photograph lying

on Kira's bed was the only link so far to endow the other document with a motive more convincing than mere madness. The verdict after the inquest had been death caused by mental derangement, and the well-paid doctors testified to it, quoting many impressive terms which no one understood, but Alexander knew Kira well enough to accept the verdict only as a polite legal consideration to spare him undue embarrassment. She had committed suicide to fool him or someone else, and now he was inclined to think that it was probably not Alexander Arnin whom she had outwitted in the end.

Yet the compromising digest about the Province of Las Monjas, a *terra incognita* if ever there was one, did not make good sense *vis-à-vis* the sissy photograph and the suicide. Alexander scratched his narrow nose along its bony ridge, reached for a pencil and jotted down on the pretty boy's back:

- (a) Nurse Thompson,
- (b) Father Murphy,
- (c) The person both of them will mention.

These three people he should interview before jumping to the sort of conclusions usually jumped to by outraged husbands. He reminded himself sternly that he was not to do a post-mortem on a dreary marital triangle. His purpose should be to find and cut that unknown connection between the digest compiled by Kira and the receiver of the copy, whoever he might be. Alexander hated the idea of some unprofessional sponger selling his information for a tenth of its worth. Arnin Senior could have reconciled himself to such a loss, but not his clever son.

Now the amateur investigator, who irritates the reader so persistently in all those high-brow detective stories, is

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prone to go in for a wasteful amassment of irrelevant facts, trailing a few clues behind him like a hopeful half-wit. Alexander took his job seriously, and would not chase any more of Kira's wild geese, in her bedroom or anywhere else. He had discovered enough to be worried stiff. For the sake of his rational method he did not wish to discover alternative clues that might upset him further.

True to his father's advice, he would proceed by the old-fashioned method of elimination. If the pretty face had nothing to do with the crux of the matter, he would be only too glad to forget about its existence. But he had to pin something down either at home or out in the open before collecting more material. After years of experience he preferred to work in the open air.

And what assured him most that his next step was right sprang from his other attainment of peace, from the sexual harmony now balancing all his moods on the two levels of secret passions. And hers too, he fondly hoped.

TWO

Nurse Thompson lived half a mile away, in Child's Hill, and walked up every day to the ailing and idle rich who were hiding from death in all those family fortresses disguised as 'Lilac Nook', 'Sunny View' or 'Dainty Gables'.

Alexander wanted to catch her before her morning rounds, because Mrs. Thompson had in a way become daily help to sick plutocrats, working by the hour and fixing her fees accordingly. He admired her for this ability

to grasp the absurd simplicity of modern economics, but Nurse Thompson preferred to see her career in terms of spiritual advance, which led her over the bumpy hopes of her widowhood, from patient to patient, all of them much in need of her moral fortitude. Kira was her last but unsuccessful pupil, who had swallowed an overdose of courage.

The nurse could, of course, give names of those who died peacefully in her muscular arms and out of religious gratitude remembered her in their wills. Her best success had been an Anglo-Catholic bishop who, though mortally ill, would not die for years, simply because he liked listening to Mrs. Thompson's bedside sermons. He left her only three hundred pounds, a sure proof that all bishops are hard-up these days, but he rewarded her amply with the personality of Father Murphy, morally staunch though physically weedy.

Chronically under-paid, Father Murphy behaved none the less very loyally during the bishop's illness, but his death was such a shock or relief to him that he read more Latin than was good for him and soon went over to Rome. He nearly dragged the widow with him over the Papist fence, but in the nick of time the Scottish blood in Mrs. Thompson's veins boiled up and then cooled down to its stubborn temperature: she would not budge an inch.

Instead, she agreed to be his part-time housekeeper for a couple of years, to steady his nerves a wee bit, as she put it; but secretly she hoped to direct him back to the dear bishop's middle path, illuminated by just the right number of candles and sprinkled only here and there with a few hygienic drops of holy water.

Unfortunately, Father Murphy's disposition belied his

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fragile appearance; and in the nurse's eyes he was fast growing to be just another obstinate mule, not fit to take her advice and unable to give her any of his. So she left him for more normally sick patients, perhaps peeved a little and disappointed, but underneath it all quite surprised that a real tough man could be found in that sickly black sheep of a priest.

Nurse Thompson was about to leave her rent-controlled cottage when Alexander called on her at a quarter to eight. Although his unannounced visit inconvenienced her greatly, for her first morning patient was a wealthy hypochondriac, she did not dare to show it. After all, she had her professional pride too, and the fatal accident with the pills had marred her blameless career: she still dreamt of Kira's death. And Mr. Arnin had behaved like a real gentleman before and after the inquest, without uttering a single word of reproach to her. How could she afford to be curt with him now?

As for Alexander, he had dropped all the social niceties on the evening of his decision, and acted in the nurse's presence like a competent spy, taking advantage of her hurried manner and uncertain glances. It would have been foolish to prepare her for this on the telephone.

"It's very inconsiderate of me, Mrs. Thompson, to come round just when you're going out." He oiled his voice with hypocrisy.

"Not at all, not at all, Mr. Arnin. Do come in. I have to make a quick telephone call, so kindly excuse me."

Alexander knew that at her high fees she could not possibly spare him more than twenty minutes, and therefore he was likely to get prompt and concise answers.

"I hope you're not getting ill yourself, Mr. Arnin," she said politely, sitting down close to the telephone.

"No, I am fine. But something urgent has cropped up and I wonder, Mrs. Thompson, whether you could help."

The last phrase sounded like an opening conversational gambit from a police officer, and Mrs. Thompson was visibly put out. She would answer well, Alexander thought, and went on, taking the large photograph out of his brief-case:

"I believe this is my wife's Polish cousin," he lied smoothly, "but unfortunately I never met him. There's a question of a small inheritance, you understand, Mrs. Thompson."

"I do understand, Mr. Arnin, but I am afraid I don't recall having seen this young gentleman." She sniffed over the photograph, obviously relieved that she was not in the slightest involved.

"I see." He got up and looked round the room to say something nice about Mrs. Thompson's cottage. Now she was anxious to be helpful to a poor widower in distress. One never knew, he might in ten years become her patient after all.

"Well, Mr. Arnin, I am still searching my memory. I wish I could be of some use to such a good and generous person as yourself."

The nurse got up too, and whether it was the low ceiling or the slanted reflex from the window, Alexander for the first time noticed how disproportionate her build was: a strong, heavy barrel of flesh standing on two sticks in black stockings. Somehow he felt he had to win her confidence and more of her sympathy for other encounters in the

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future, which he thought were sure to come. He said:

"It is you, Mrs. Thompson, who were good and kind to us. I shall never forget how patient, loving and understanding you were to my wife. Such qualities come only from an inner moral strength."

Nurse Thompson could not help blushing, though she did not do that often: she responded to the word 'moral' like a young girl to a mention of love; and, moreover, she was reminded of Father Murphy.

"But Mr. Arnin, I only do what duty tells me to do. The rest comes from God's guidance." She was again reminded of Father Murphy, who, anyway, had the knack of cropping up in other people's thoughts. Alexander was about to ask for his address, but Mrs. Thompson rushed in first with her suggestion:

"Mr. Arnin, I recall Mrs. Arnin mentioning a young man, no, a boy in Father Murphy's presence. I came in to take her temperature when she, poor dear, sitting there propped against all those pillows, said these very words: 'Father,' she said, 'I am worried about the boy, I am very worried.' No more, no less, just that she said, while I was walking to her bed."

Nurse Thompson was a born mimic. As she quoted Kira's words her thick-featured face loosened and a flicker of intense curiosity brightened her watery eyes. Alexander could just imagine Kira telling the priest how worried she was; for whenever she said anything with utter conviction, her eyes invariably expressed wild curiosity.

"This is most helpful, Mrs. Thompson. I am sure Father Murphy will remember more details. Thank you very much."

ISOLATION

"I am always glad to oblige, Mr. Arnin. And, well . . . if you go and see Father Murphy, I'd better tell you that he's a wee bit nervy these days."

"Thank you for telling me that."

The sticks in black stockings trotted after him to the door, impressive in the way they supported the solid weight above them.

Now, Father Murphy had done rather badly out of his conversion. He had certainly carried a donkey's burden under the bishop's spiritual supervision, but the loads put on his slender shoulders by the Catholic Church would have crushed ten sturdy asses. He was given the meanest, the poorest and generally the most lapsable parish in Greater London, and there he worked against the oddest of odds, praying, starving, giving help, and praying again.

Alexander had met him only twice during Kira's illness, and had been mildly amused to hear how she relished calling someone Father hundreds of times in one conversation. The priest seemed pleasant enough, and since Kira had found his presence consoling, Alexander treated him as yet another doctor who fortunately would not send any bills.

After leaving Nurse Thompson, Alexander went by Tube to Paddington, got on to a bus there and finally knocked on the door of a dilapidated house by a canal. He had to wait for the priest, who was saying his third Mass that morning. When Father Murphy arrived, haggard-looking but cheerful, Alexander realised that he would have to watch the priest eat his late breakfast, and this prospect depressed him.

At last they could talk, and Alexander drove straight

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to the point: who was the boy Kira had discussed with him? Had Father Murphy ever met the boy? If so, would he recognise his face? Until then the photograph remained in the brief-case.

As Alexander was about to take it out, Father Murphy made a little gesture which had the same vagueness as his answers, and said:

"I didn't want to bring up the subject, Mr. Arnin. After all, the wishes of the dead, even when they're unfulfilled, should be either respected or passed over in silence. The priest's work, I hope you understand, constantly demands discretion, not only in the confessional, that is."

"I understand perfectly well, Father."

"But," the priest continued, turning a tea-spoon in his hand, "your wife's problem, Mr. Arnin, does perhaps concern you now, after her death. I wouldn't like to press anything on you, especially since the thing I am talking about requires a moral decision, your moral decision, that is."

"Well, you'd better tell me what it is, Father."

"Mrs. Arnin wanted her boy to be baptized and brought up as a Catholic, but she was afraid of you. I hope you don't mind my saying this."

"Mind?" Alexander laughed, shaking his head. "How could I possibly mind?"

"Well, as an orthodox Jew, you have good reasons for opposing your wife's wish. And I should be the last person to take your religious principles lightly. I understand and sympathise. Very much," he added, and mopped his forehead with a large coloured handkerchief.

This handkerchief was Father Murphy's prop during the whole of their cagey conversation: he held it close to

his face, squeezed it from time to time like a sponge, and then wiped off the accumulated drops of sweat. Alexander had never seen anybody sweat so much on the face in weather as chilly as this. The second half of April was behaving according to all the predictable misrules of the English climate: it was getting cooler and cooler with the neurotic progress of spring.

Alexander wished he could openly play with his own handkerchief, if only to protect his nose from the stench crawling out of the canal below the window. But he owed the priest some explanation, and laughter was not a polite substitute for it.

"Father," he said, staring at him in the steadfast and most trustworthy manner, "I am not a Jew, orthodox, lapsed, or what have you; I am sorry, but I am simply not one. My wife was, and, as far as I could see, she showed no interest in her religion."

"But she was interested in religion, Mr. Arnin."

"Perhaps with you. My wife, you see, had the knack of getting absorbed in other people's interests when they were in her presence. But she could switch off just like that!"—Alexander snapped his fingers—"as soon as the character in question left her room." He noticed the priest's handkerchief go up like a pennon of surrender, and felt sorry for him. This sort of deceitful piety was probably used by his Irish and West Indian parishioners every day of the week, and he did not relish being reminded of it.

"But the little boy, her . . . your son, Mr. Arnin," he clumsily groped for words, "what religion does he profess, on paper at least?"

"None, Father, for the simple reason that he does not

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exist and never did exist, except in one of my wife's fantasies, and these too are dead now."

Father Murphy looked baffled, but would not accept Kira's story as a pathetic lie for his moral anxieties to feed on.

"Imagination, especially when it comes straight from the soul, cannot die with the body. This, Mr. Arnin, I am inclined to think true."

"Well, the trouble is that imagination always leaps out from the wrong place, Father." At that moment he saw Rita's wardrobe in a passage of his thoughts and sniggered inwardly at the recognition.

"I pray for the soul of your wife. She shouldn't have done that thing, she shouldn't," the priest mumbled.

"Yes, it was unnecessary." Alexander wore a well-adjusted hypocritical expression, but under its mask he thought cynically of the cheque he ought to send Father Murphy to secure future favours. They always need money in those hideous badly built churches, for the new organ or the rotting staircase. A hundred pounds might make the innocent lamb 'a wee bit nervy': he remembered Nurse Thompson's warning just in time. Fifty? No—that was so obviously half an intended generosity. He would write out a cheque for sixty-two pounds to puzzle the priest in case he had some cunning tucked away in that weedy body of his.

"I wish I could be of some help to you, Mr. Arnin," the priest muttered inaudibly through his handkerchief. Help was the commodity everybody expected him to supply, and he knew he was miserably short of it himself.

"I hope we shall meet more often, Father," Alexander said, and decided on sixty-two pounds exactly.

ISOLATION

"I hope so, too, Mr. Arnin."

"One more question, Father; did my wife ever show you a photograph of a young man who was supposed to be our son?"

"No, never. But it wasn't a young man Mrs. Arnin described to me. She always mentioned a dark-haired boy of nine."

THREE

Alexander had no illusions when it came to sifting human reports, both malicious and sympathetic. One thing they inevitably lacked was ironic detachment, facts like raisins being hidden in too much pastry. On the whole, he preferred catty comments, if comments there had to be, because they sharpened details, and he was always after details.

Nurse Thompson, he had noticed on several occasions during her stay in the house, could be informative about middle-aged women like herself, and her cattiness scratched best those of them who were married and not yet widowed. It was fascinating to see her pick out details from the catalogue of female tricks.

This sharpness he should have encouraged in the nurse instead of blunting it with flattery. In the vague hope of amending his tactical error, Alexander went for a stroll to Child's Hill on the following day. It was the lunch-hour, and she might be doing her shopping between patients, so to speak. His guess proved right. He spotted her outside a greengrocer's shop, bent over a box of

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anæmic apples. Her legs seemed even thinner from a distance.

Alexander loitered near the bus-stop, and when Nurse Thompson was about to cross the road he began crossing it too, but from the opposite direction. They met in the middle, just as the traffic-lights changed, and a red bus rolled by them. Greetings were visibly exchanged, but not heard in the noise. He helped her to get to the other side of the road.

Then he praised chance for this opportunity of having a word with her, and Mrs. Thompson duly said she was also very glad to see him.

"Now that the shock is slowly passing," he began in a slightly trembling voice, "I ought to write a few letters to those of my wife's friends who were most devoted to her in those long weeks of her spiritual agony. I believe, Mrs. Thompson, there were some ladies who visited her often during my absence."

Alexander succeeded in confusing the nurse by the simultaneous mention of spiritual agony and the visiting ladies. She went for the ladies with her paws out.

"Oh, you're being a wee bit too kind, Mr. Arnin. They were just a few clucking hens who had nothing to do, and their husbands worked themselves to the bone just to keep them lazy. Besides, they got the best tea in London when they came, and gobbled all those lovely French pastries which Mrs. Arnin had specially sent from Wigmore Street every other day."

"Still, I remember my wife writing about those ladies in her letters, and always with affection."

"Mr. Arnin"—her voice was becoming indignant—"there are many kinds of affection, and having been a

nurse these last fourteen years, I do know how sick people open up their hearts to anybody who happens to be around. Your wife, Mr. Arnin, was very kind, but she was also very sick. As for the ladies, well, you are indeed most polite to call them that: they were only worth laughing at. And Mrs. Arnin did laugh at them, and often, and in my presence. I could tell you a thing or two about those ladies, if I were a gossiping type."

Alexander had to screw up that talkative mood a little tighter: they were reaching her cottage and lunch-time was running out.

"Which of them, would you say, was my wife's closest friend?"

"None. Mrs. Arnin saw through them all, and soon got bored if any one of them tried to be too chummy. She had nicknames for them too; that shows, Mr. Arnin, what she really thought of them."

"Really? What sort of nicknames?" Alexander asked, encouraging Nurse Thompson, who was yielding a nice crop of details.

"The one I hated most," she could not help being openly frank, "she called Mrs. Antique, because she was married to an antique dealer in Golders Green."

"Ah, yes. I know whom you mean, Mrs. Thompson, I have her address."

"And there was Mrs. Ragandbone, the wife of that funny fat doctor, you remember him, Mr. Arnin?"

"Yes, of course." He remembered the doctor only too well: he was an osteopath who came towards the end, with the last and most expensive bunch of doctors, and he seemed to multiply his fees by the number of bones he manipulated.

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"And there was also . . ." Mrs. Thompson was obviously enjoying herself. She did not notice that they had passed her cottage and were now walking up the hill. Alexander interrupted her and said, faking panic:

"Good Lord! It's ten past two. I must be off. I've got an important appointment in half an hour, in the West End. It's been so nice seeing you, Mrs. Thompson. Good-bye."

True, he had an important appointment, but very much later, and the business of it was love. He considered their meetings at Rita's place as his most important engagements of the week, and no amount of spying after Kira's possible treachery could at present alter his attitude to Dolores. She existed in a world apart, guarding his passion in the natter-proof tower of isolation.

What had made him leave Nurse Thompson so abruptly was a sudden twitch in his memory. It had thrown out the image of a snuff-box when Mrs. Thompson so cattily mentioned Mrs. Antique. A young man's face spoilt by a few pimples appeared almost simultaneously with the snuff-box. This was it. Why had he overlooked the incident before?

Alexander needed only a brief experiment to prove to himself that his memory was not getting mixed up with dreams. He rushed home, seated himself in the arm-chair opposite the grand piano in Kira's music-room and reached for the snuff-box lying on a small table. Surrounded by the objects in whose silent company the scene had taken place, he put his memory to the test. A spy's private cinema, as he described the test to himself, dutifully began to show a sequence from an old reel.

Kira sat on the piano-stool, her feet resting on the four-

volume edition of Liszt and talked to a young man who had brought the snuff-box. Alexander listened without much attention, although the little antique oddment was meant for him.

One of the pleasures envisaged by Kira for her traveller husband was taking snuff, because it would be both relaxing and hygienic in all those smelly countries he kept visiting. But Alexander knew the source of her idea: it had sprung from Kira's correspondence with one of her cousins who either sold the stuff or indulged in it, Alexander did not remember which.

Now the young fellow was chattering very smartly about the old bore Liszt and the middle-aged bore, his own Mamma, who ran Papa's antique shop in Golders Green. He had already sold the snuff-box to Kira, but kept on twittering about it like a salesman, to Alexander's great annoyance. It was on the eve of his departure for Turkey, and he felt family myths in the air, weighing on his nomadic conscience. He wanted to be alone with Kira.

"Alee, my darling Alee," Kira said later when they were in bed, "you must do something for this young antique expert when you come back from Constantinople. He's so knowledgeable and would like to visit first Central America and then Alaska."

Kira was always precise in her requests concerning other people, and Alexander always counteracted by doing precisely nothing for them.

The trick with the private cinema had worked, and Alexander got up from the arm-chair, pocketed the useless snuff-box and went downstairs. He had to pay a short visit to Mrs. Antique. But before going out, he remembered the anthracite stove. It might be worth while

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examining the ashes. Just in case Mr. Antique junior had spent a holiday in Sicily before sailing off to Alaska.

Kira's bedroom looked as if a band of charwomen had raided it out of spite: Alexander liked the mess and kicked a few objects to improve it. He opened the stove, raked the ashes until they fell down through the grate, and then searched in the pile, using both hands.

To his surprise he found a small hard object, and cleaned it carefully in the kitchen. He could have been mistaken, but the thing looked like a bit of tooth. Alexander wrapped it up and put it in the drawer where his guns lay on a piece of black velvet.

Mrs. Antique was not as lazy as Nurse Thompson made her out to be. She sat in her husband's shop at least two hours a day, usually between lunch and tea. The business ran itself, and she merely ran her husband.

"I brought you this beautiful snuff-box, Mrs. Lesser; I think my wife wanted your son to have it. I am afraid I've forgotten his name."

"Maurice, Mr. Arnin, Maurice. It's his lucky little box in a way. The first thing he ever sold. He will be very pleased in a way."

To Kira's antique Mrs. Lesser all manner of things happened 'in a way', and she qualified events by this phrase, while her eyes priced what they saw through very strong glasses. She liked the idea of an object already sold being returned as a gift: this combined profit with sentiment, and she constantly reminded her timid husband that she had given him as much sentiment as advice. With strangers, however, she employed the technique of a wise brothel-keeper and talked sentimentally about the sordid

aspects of sex—especially when she was trying to sell decrepit French beds and cracked china basins. She treated Alexander as a possible customer.

“Kira—what a dear sweet girl she was, Mr. Arnin. In a way, she liked Maurice, and in a way I did perhaps tell her too much about Maurice’s shyness with women. Kira was trying to be as helpful as she possibly could. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Arnin?” She palmed the snuff-box lecherously. “I said to Kira that no sex in a boy of Maurice’s age was bad for business and his health. And in a way Maurice was an obstinate virgin.”

Alexander understood all that Mrs. Antique lewdly implied, but she would not allow him to change the subject.

“Yes, it started with this pretty snuff-box in a way, Mr. Arnin. Then Kira invited Maurice quite often, so that the dear boy could get used to you know what I mean, in a way. And she asked me to buy Stendhal’s novels for Maurice, but Maurice became even more self-conscious after reading them. Kira was so very patient and in a way like a second mother to him. But he got frightened and ran away, Mr. Arnin.”

“To Sicily?” he said calmly.

“My goodness, no! To Cardiff, Mr. Arnin. His uncle has a small antique shop there. They get on well in a way, and the business is all right. So, if you know what I mean, sex has not much effect on a really good brain.”

“You’ll send the snuff-box to your son, won’t you, Mrs. Lesser?”

“Right away, Mr. Arnin.” And behind her thick glasses she thought quickly how much she could safely add to the original price. Those who were eccentric enough to re-

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turn for sentiment wares that had been bought for cash could not expect sentimental treatment.

As a result of his visit to Golders Green, Alexander was for the first time late in meeting Dolores. She had his map spread out on the floor.

"I thought I'd got all the dates wrong, Alexander. But it's Friday."

"Yes, it is Friday. I am sorry I'm late."

He glanced sideways at the pink bathtub. It was here that Rita had begun to lay traps for them. This time there was a swim-suit which did not quite look like a swim-suit, and was hooked to a dripping tap. Dolores laughed when she noticed his glance.

"Rita is really incorrigible. She's noticed we're not all that keen on her wardrobe, so she feels her pride is hurt, and gets worked up about her silly tub. Do you know what Rita said?"

"What did she say?"

"That I don't read enough. But I've read all there is by that funny man, Henry Miller."

"Have you really?"

"But it's so uncomfortable, Alexander."

"To read?"

"No, to do."

The trappings of love, like Rita's costumes, still hung around them in the clandestine flats, in their memory and in the stories they were telling each other about their supporting characters. But they had both done their crude trials and elevated love above adolescent pornography and above infantile fetishes. Each new act now lifted them straight into pure passion which was as burning as the sun over the snow-level at the top of a mountain.

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The time of their love stood still. They could neither remember the last touch of desire when their mouths met, nor imagine what the touch would be like at the next approach of their lips. All pleasure became unique: it shone through the continuous haze of oblivion, convincing them in the end that it was unrepeatable. And they offered each other their bodies in gratitude for their mutual isolation.

Since Alexander knew so little about Dolores, he was ready to believe that his isolation required a more difficult switch-over every time he met her. The space off-stage was filling up, on his side anyway, and he had to continue dialogues with his minor characters.

"What is the name of the scent?" Dolores asked suddenly, and he was taken aback as before.

"The one you're wearing?"

"No, hers."

"Oh yes . . . its Corinth, a name I've never heard of."

"I've heard of it," she said. "It's made in Sicily, of all the unlikely places. Must get a good supply through someone going next week to Palermo. Perfume travels well by diplomatic bag, you know."

Alexander kept silent for a time, and then surprised her with his sudden question:

"Tell me, were you ever interested in very young men, I mean almost boys?"

Dolores understood what sort of interest he implied, and answered at once:

"No, never. You see, I have a boy: he's just nine and his hair is dark, too." Her hand moved up and touched Alexander's head.

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A curtain of silence dropped.

Two hours later, when they were out of Rita's place, Alexander said to Dolores:

"Do you really mean to get that scent—Corinth?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"As a camouflage. Don't you see? Oh, you wouldn't make a good spy, Alexander; you just wouldn't."

FOUR

Shrimp did not ring up on Tuesday, or the following Tuesday, or the Tuesday after. When his voice finally bellowed into Alexander's receiver, it was Saturday, the first day of May. He telephoned at eleven as he had said he would, but eleven at night.

"Is that Mr. Arnin? Pennyworth here. Hope I'm not disturbing."

"No, Commander, not at all. How are you?"

"Highly inconvenienced, old boy. By our socialised railway system. My last train, Arnin, is gone and I am not in it. Could you put me up for the night?"

"Well——" Alexander hated putting people up, but the voice at the other end sounded desperate.

"Can't go to the Club, old boy. Shall explain later."

"Come along then, Commander."

"You're most hospitable, Arnin. See you presently."

Shrimp arrived very soon, by taxi, and Alexander paid the fare. The old phoney looked miserable and said with-

out any pretence that he was hungry. As he sat facing the light, his wrinkled hand clutching a ham sandwich, Alexander experienced a strange feeling of guilt. There was something uncomfortably similar between his own father's seedy success and this man's shabby disguise of failure. Both had gambled with their self-respect, and like other desperate gamblers turned into cheats when necessary.

It is not so easy, however, to atone for a feeling of guilt with ham sandwiches, whisky and coffee even if the recipient enjoys all three to the utmost. Alexander had to feed Shrimp with words as well, so he struck the manly note of *Kameradschaft*.

"Tell me, Commander," he said, "what was the last big racket you were in?"

"A special outfit during the last Jerry war, Arnin. Wasn't anything big. On your scale, I mean. Mainly clubs, old boy."

"Clubs? I don't understand, Commander."

"Don't think you heard of them. *The New Aryan Club*, *The Irish Patriot*, *The Linguists' Ping-Pong Centre*, things like that. Ran all of them for the government, old boy. Caught quite a few big fish in my humble nets. Remember the spy Krumpenkübel? Got him through the ping-pong outfit."

"That's remarkable, Commander. Have more whisky."

"There's no future, Arnin, in our profession. None," Shrimp bellowed and drank up the whisky. "Too many common people have got into the racket. Remember that outrageous story about an ambassador's valet who did some spying on the side? A valet, I ask you. What was the chap's name? Oh, yes, James Mason."

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"You've got it wrong, Commander. James Mason played the valet's part in the film."

"Films? Never see them, old boy. Last one I saw was with Sarah Bernhardt."

"Was she good in it?" Alexander was being very polite, and he gave the Commander more to drink.

"Awful, Arnin, she was just awful. I knew then there was no future for the bioscope."

His shrimp eyes bulged further and his reddish skin tightened: he looked dreadful. At this point Alexander felt like asking him a more personal question:

"Tell me, Commander, why did you chuck it all after the war?"

Pennyworth thing eyed him sideways like a deep-water monster lying in wait for prey. Then he answered with curt modesty:

"Bungled a few jobs, just bungled them, Arnin. "

"Pity. But you've got a pension, haven't you?"

"No pension, old boy. None." Shrimp filled the glass himself, sniffed it before drinking, and then said in a sombre rustling whisper: "Why don't you take me on, Arnin? I'm just the man for you. Experience, discretion, good breeding, sound judgment. Do anything for a spot of cash, Arnin."

"Well, Commander——" And as he was wondering what to say next, Alexander coolly observed the pathetic ex-spy who, he knew for certain, would undertake any sordid job, if offered board and lodging and some pocket money. "I'd better show you to your room upstairs. You look tired. And we'll talk about other things tomorrow after breakfast."

The shrimp eyes stared at the bottle of whisky, and the

bottle cast a crooked shadow on to a clock. It was half-past one.

Next day Alexander installed Commander Pennyworth in a genteel boarding-house not far from Notting Hill Gate station, and paid three weeks in advance. If anything unexpected was going to crop up, it would probably happen during these three weeks. And later?—well, Shrimp might do one of his vanishing tricks, he might even vanish altogether and die.

The Commander played the part of a very gaga and impoverished uncle while Alexander was counting the pound notes, and the manageress smiled at him from behind her desk, with the understanding of a lonely woman.

When she left them, Shrimp turned to Alexander and instead of thanking him, remarked in his crisp chummy manner:

"You've got so much money, Arnin." It sounded really like "You've got far too much money, old boy, and might as well waste some on me."

Alexander made a vague promise to ring him up towards the end of the week or next Sunday, and quickly returned home to read his morning papers. No sooner had he arrived than he heard the telephone in his study. It was Nurse Thompson in her moral mood, calling him, as she said, immediately after the service. Hymn music still seemed to echo in her militant voice:

"Mr. Arnin, I hope you haven't done anything about those ladies." In one sentence she dispensed with polite apologies and drove to the point: "If I were a gossiping type, I could have told you a great deal. The things they said about their husbands to Mrs. Arnin! And Mrs. Arnin

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repeated everything to me; yes, she did, and I could put that doctor's wife in her place tomorrow; yes, I could."

"Which doctor's wife, Mrs. Thompson?"

"You remember Mrs. Ragandbone, don't you, Mr. Arnin? That's what your wife called her. She had a filthy mind. To say the things she said to a refined lady like your wife—I must admit I am still shocked."

Alexander assumed from the nurse's indignation that she must have spoken to the doctor's wife, and quite recently. He therefore dropped a simple bait:

"Well, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Thompson, I didn't think much of Mrs. Ragandbone when I met her."

"Of course, you didn't, Mr. Arnin. You saw through her, as I did from the start. And the cheek of that woman! To accuse me of negligence; and nearly two months after the inquest when everything was said and settled."

"She certainly hasn't the right to do that," Alexander said, knowing that this would make Mrs. Thompson flare up. She did flare up.

"Mr. Arnin," she almost shrieked into the telephone, "that woman approached me only today outside the chapel and started making nasty hints—that I hadn't looked after Mrs. Arnin properly, that it was my fault she got hold of those pills, that because of me——"

Alexander interrupted the flow with a remark well dipped in soothing sympathy—though he felt none, and it was the possibility of extracting something useful from her talk that excited him now.

"Mrs. Thompson," he said, "you acted to the best of your ability and I personally feel nothing but admiration for your conduct during those very trying days."

"Thank you, sir," she mumbled meekly and then burst

out again: "But who does she think she is, that Ragand-bone woman, smearing other people's reputations, when she herself has none to keep clean? She and her leech of a husband! He is so keen on his patients' bones that he has no time for her flabby flesh. And besides, I know a thing or two about him that she doesn't know. I've just written a letter to him to remind him of what poor Mrs. Arnin had to go through——"

Nurse Thompson stopped for a moment; she realised that perhaps this rash talk might lead her into trouble with Arnin rather than the osteopath. But Alexander asked with unexpected calm:

"Have you already posted the letter, Mrs. Thompson?"

"Yes, I have."

There was no point in saying anything else: he had to consider a fact, and facts, he knew well, could not change back into alternatives. This was Sunday, the doctor would receive her letter on Monday morning, and either ignore it or do something silly. In the latter case, Alexander was bound to hear from him. So the situation had already acquired a distinct shape, and no matter what the nurse was going to do next, it could not much affect the immediate course of events.

Thinking with the receiver close to his ear, Alexander missed half her monologue, but suddenly she mentioned Kira's name once more.

"What was it you said, Mrs. Thompson?"

"He called her 'my darling Kira' when he thought I was not in the corridor. And——"

"Mrs. Thompson, I think we've talked enough, don't you agree? I am not really interested in all those——"

"But Mr. Arnin," she interrupted, her voice climbing

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into a spiritual pulpit, "that pig of a doctor wanted to run away with her."

Alexander rang off.

His deduction proved right. The doctor reacted to the letter with foolishness and rang him up soon after breakfast. He wanted to come round; it was urgent, he said.

Now Alexander had before his eyes a sad specimen of humanity whose brain was pumped with too much knowledge and his limbs with too much fat. The osteopath began by showing him Mrs. Thompson's letter, which for a first exercise in libel was rather good, except that it ended like a homily with a quotation from Scripture.

"My wife received a similar letter," the doctor said stuttering a little, "and, Mr. Arnin, she ransacked my desk before breakfast." He sat badly in the chair, his enormous thighs pressing against the seams of his trousers. "I think she found two of Kira's letters, and the whole situation has become intolerable. Beatrix may even divorce me, though poor Kira is no longer with us."

The tone he adopted for his confession bordered on insolence, but he was too confused to hear it; he mentioned Kira only by her name and then started mixing it up with that of his wife. Beatrix was no longer with them, he stuttered, and might use Kira's letters in court.

"How did it all happen, Doctor?" Alexander behaved like a lawyer questioning Mrs. Ragandbone's husband before divorce proceedings.

"I honestly don't know, Mr. Arnin. According to Mrs. Thompson it was Beatrix who put the idea into Kira's head. She apparently described me as a sexual maniac, raping his female patients to their delight. But can we, Mr. Arnin, trust Mrs. Thompson's biased account?"

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"Perhaps we can. With some reservations, of course," Alexander said with glee and handed the doctor a box of cigarettes.

"Beatrix couldn't possibly tell such stories, ever. She's very proper, I assure you, Mr. Arnin."

"Let's go back to the subject, shall we, Doctor?"

"Well, Kira made some advances to me. It was after the third treatment, I think, when I had already examined her spine. I couldn't quite understand. She acted like an invalid, and then suddenly she wanted me to make love to her. I said it was most irregular; professional code, her health and so on. I didn't mention Beatrix, no, I don't think so, but they were good friends anyway. Still, Kira would not be easily dissuaded; she had her ways with men, you understand, Mr. Arnin."

"Yes, I do understand."

"Well, I felt more and more flattered, and Kira used all her extraordinary charm. She really had such a powerful personality, Mr. Arnin."

"Yes, I think she had."

"In the end it became most difficult. Frankly, I didn't know how to get out of the situation; because Kira's health was improving and this restored my faith in osteopathy. As a doctor I faced a dilemma. Then Kira said I really wanted to marry her, and this would resolve my medical scruples, but we should first run away."

"So you went with her to Sicily."

"Oh, no! Mr. Arnin, Beatrix always travels with me on holidays. Besides, Kira went to Sicily later. And alone. This, by the way, helped me to become my usual self again, and then after her return Kira, too, was most understanding. But unfortunately I wrote her two or three notes.

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She loved receiving little notes, you understand. I hope they can be found, now that Beatrix is threatening . . .”

“I shall look for them, Doctor. Don’t worry.”

He looked very worried and fidgeted in the chair, his thighs stretching the trousers to breaking point.

“Ask me any questions you like, Mr. Arnin. I want to make a clean breast of it all. And you’re so understanding.”

“Only two questions, Doctor. But first excuse me for a moment.”

Alexander went to his study and returned, holding a small object on a piece of paper.

“You know all about bones, Doctor. What would you say this is?”

The osteopath examined the object and said:

“A bit of human tooth, of course.”

“I thought so too. Thank you, Doctor. And——”

Alexander paused: “Did you give Kira a bottle of perfume as a present?”

“No,” the doctor shook his head. “It never occurred to me to give Kira anything. Perhaps I was just mean, Mr. Arnin.”

“No, Doctor, you were, shall we say—a little out of practice in love-affairs.”

The man rose to go, and handing him his coat, Alexander observed casually:

“Life without a wife can be quite pleasant. Why don’t you let Beatrix divorce you? It’s a good opportunity, Doctor.”

He used Mrs. Ragandbone’s Christian name on purpose, and this had an immediate effect: the doctor could not get a good-bye out of his stuttering mouth.

Alexander exuded a wistful mood when he met Dolores

the same afternoon in Regent's Park. They were not going to any of the flats: their temporary homelessness made them at last aware of the time of the year, and they counted the different shades of green in the trees and the grass. She wore green herself, and this seemed to attract the movements of twigs, their fresh leaves waving over her head as she passed.

"Shrimp is on to big things, Dolores. If you want to see him in the flesh, go to Notting Hill Gate. His disguise is rather old-fashioned, but I find it attractive. Old Shrimp walks the streets of Notting Hill dressed up as Sarah Bernhardt."

"How fascinating," said Dolores. "Nearly as fascinating as Ela's latest idea."

"What is Ela's idea?"

"She wants Edmundo to challenge her husband to a duel. Ela says he's slipping as a romantic lover. A duel will do him a lot of good."

"Dolores, I don't believe you."

"Alexander," she retorted, "I don't believe in Shrimp dressed up as Sarah Bernhardt."

"It's not so impossible. You see, he saw Sarah Bernhardt in a bioscope, and it was a costume film, of course."

"You know, Alexander, you should give Commander Shrimp a proper spying job to do. He's getting a bit too lazy for my liking."

"I might, Dolores, I might. And quite soon."

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FIVE

Like most rational people, Alexander did not enjoy laughing at himself when he was alone; but his experience taught him to recognise the ridiculous once it started distorting his vision. He suddenly saw himself on an absurd holiday in London, being in love with an obsession and chasing the cryptic memory of scent in an empty bottle.

He had, in fact, hired himself to spy on his dead wife, but the only document so far which compromised Kira lay in the drawer together with his guns and a bit of tooth, refusing to co-operate. What was ridiculous in Alexander's search, then, concerned his involvement with Kira's neurotic affairs, against his original intention.

Instead of tracing the present owner of the missing top copy, he had traced the supporting cast of Kira's erotic tragi-comedy, and the characters let loose by him were now beginning to use him as their reliable prompter. The only man he could direct at will was Shrimp, but, strictly speaking, Shrimp did not belong to the theatrical world of his and Kira's making. The Commander existed by the grace of Dolores's fantasies, and now she wished him to wear a spy's costume, with all the extra trappings provided by Alexander.

As for Kira's posthumous portrait, it was steadily gaining in likeness. Willy-nilly he had to watch it grow new features which he had never thought could be hidden just

under the skin as potential rivals to the ones he had known.

Alexander recognised the outlines of a pattern in Kira's emotional attachment to men like the virginal Maurice and the wife-ridden osteopath. Her procedure was always the same: she did some spying through the women around the male in question, exploited their lack of discretion, making a wife, for instance, reveal her husband's bedroom secrets; then she would weave a cobweb of fantasies about those facts and wait for the man to fall into it.

Naturally, she did not like the trap to be so obviously a trap; her intention was always noble, such as the saving of a fat busy doctor from marital diffidence or the initiation of an inexperienced adolescent. How touching was that generous streak in Kira's calculations. She seemed to have convinced herself that what she plotted and sometimes achieved put her above the vulgar and gossipy lot of females, because to her giving meant more than taking.

When they were much together in their first London year, Alexander had often noticed how repetitive Kira's little tricks were. And how charming for him at each recognition. Kira could not bear to see a butcher in a butcher, a greengrocer in a greengrocer, and any other mark of trade in a tradesman. This, of course, was flattering to the shopkeepers she visited in upper and lower Hampstead, but for Kira it represented a private system of attachments.

A butcher who merely sold meat to her deserved his money but nothing else; a butcher, however, who behaved like her potential lover while cutting and weighing his pork or beef received teasing encouragement in return, and was allowed to think himself Kira's romantic servant.

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Anything might fall upon him from her generous unpredictability.

Kira would have made a love-inspiring empress or a high priestess, and she herself admitted it in those of her dreams which she told Alexander when they still talked of such things. A priestess or an empress not only symbolised the highest ideal of love, but could also contain the lower forms of it like a vessel. So into this vessel all servant lovers were invited to pour their passion for Kira—doctors, butchers, greengrocers, hairdressers and the rest.

But did Father Murphy, the weedy servant of God, qualify for this double relationship with Kira? She certainly loved calling him Father, that much Alexander knew; yet she could hardly have expected to turn a priest into a couturier of her soul. The answer came with Father Murphy in person. He clumsily thanked Alexander for the cheque, blushed and mumbled, unable to acknowledge his first substantial donation with a snappy blessing. The organ was to benefit from the sixty-two pounds, as Alexander had guessed, not a new one, though, but the old, whose pipes, the priest said, throttled rather horribly when the full wind passed through them.

Alexander tried to put the priest at his ease, shifted the moral significance of his deed back to Kira and skilfully tied his words to the end of their previous conversation.

"I am so glad, Father, that you've given me another opportunity of discussing my wife with you. After all, she confided in you more than in anyone else I can think of."

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Arnin. Please don't imagine I could really talk on her level. Your wife, Mr. Arnin, was a most up-to-date intellectual and I felt always so ill-equipped

to explain religious matters to her, I mean in the idiom of modern discussion."

His handkerchief went up to his forehead, but it was white this time, as if to symbolise the innocence of his words. The dust-covers in the sitting-room where they talked were also white, and the combination of the two set Alexander's thoughts in motion: he remembered Kira's drawers laid out with girlishly white underwear which she bought like a pedantic collector, changing styles but never experimenting with other colours.

Perhaps the atmosphere of the house helped Father Murphy as well, for he spoke of Kira in a more relaxed manner. She seemed to be not far away, somewhere out of doors probably, on the Heath or down in Golders Green.

"Kira was prone to show off on occasions, Father. Especially when she talked to those whom she recognised as her superiors."

"Oh, no, no!" The priest was in an exclamatory mood and once more protested his trust in Kira's honesty. "Mrs. Arnin was so uninhibited, I mean intellectually uninhibited when she discussed her problems and mine."

"Your problems, Father?"

"Yes, Mr. Arnin. And she was right to do so. A fair exchange of ideas between layman and priest is a necessity of our times. And Mrs. Arnin, I remember, said in her charming way that it was a pity someone else before us had left a literary record of just such a relationship. She often compared herself to Simone Weil, with full modesty of course, and she even gave me Simone Weil's book in French. Unfortunately my French would not stand up to that test. I relied mainly on Mrs. Arnin's digests, which

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were most helpful. You see, she understood the problem so well, being herself Jewish and much attracted to Christianity."

"Oh, yes," Alexander muttered, recalling a thin character from Edinburgh who had lectured Kira on Simone Weil for hours on end. It was during a heat-wave in London and Kira had collected an odd assortment of types to keep her company at Mrs. Antique's chic swimming-pool.

"And there was that whisky-priest theme we joked about——" Father Murphy continued, his eloquence rising and falling like the white handkerchief he was holding. "Mrs. Arnin teased me as to why I didn't become a drunk during the *noche oscura* of my faith, for she claimed I must have passed through one. But I was perhaps a little too exacting about the mysticism of St. John of the Cross, so we never got very far from that starting point. I repeated to her, however, that the equation of a priest's inner conflicts with the inner effects of whisky was perhaps illuminating, but only as regards the workings of a literary imagination. And Mrs. Arnin's comment was that I should not try to utter such long sentences because it reminded her of her Latin lessons, and she disliked them very much, she said. I don't think your wife learnt much Latin at school, Mr. Arnin."

"No, not much."

"So now and again we had these literary recreations, as I called them, and I was glad to see Mrs. Arnin smile though she had her pains then and tried to hide them. Do you know what your wife once suggested, for the sake of the argument, I mean?"

"What did Kira suggest?" Alexander gave his conversa-

tional cue, and watched the transformations of Father Murphy's face. With each monologue a new vivacity pushed through the pallor of his ordinary expression. Kira must have been the only glimmer of irresponsible charm in his life. Now, talking of her charm, he looked like an Irish actor in the rôle of an Irish priest, and the sight was not unpleasant.

"Mr. Arnin, your wife argued that I could not grasp the nature of other people's sins unless I did something contrary to my vocation, like running away with a woman," she said, and even marrying her. In that book, she said there's a priest who lives with a woman, but the whisky priest still considers him to be a priest. So, Mrs. Arnin argued, sin could be used as a grinder of the soul—I think she used that phrase—provided . . ." He did not finish. Staring at the dust-covers, he ran the handkerchief across his lips. Alexander thought the priest was embarrassed by hearing himself repeat Kira's words, but he was only waiting for a nodding sign.

"That sounds like Kira," Alexander confirmed.

"Well, I replied I was a disappointment to modern literature, and your wife laughed, saying that I might still run away with someone like Mrs. Thompson or herself. Your wife had a childish sense of humour."

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," said Alexander in a rather loud voice. This startled Father Murphy:

"Why did you quote that phrase, Mr. Arnin?"

"Just an association, Father. I am prone to catch one like a cold, quite suddenly."

It was an association after a spy's fashion, because it suggested a course of action. Alexander took his Sicilian tooth and went to Kira's dentist.

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He happened to be a Polish dentist, very efficient and very confidential. His confidential air was both invigorating and subtle, for he behaved like a gynæcologist being most understanding about a husband's ignorance of his wife's inner problems. He also implied that he could have been the clan doctor of the Pinskis, had he obtained his degree at the age of three; he knew the whole lot of them by name, from the fabulous Papa to every distant uncle making money to the best of his abilities. But the abilities of Papa Pinski still impressed the dentist, twenty-five round years after Pinski's death, and his confidential manner showed it beautifully:

"Papa Pinski," the dentist said, "had three businesses, three," he repeated and showed the three on his bony fingers. "One in Warsaw," he crooked one finger, "the second in Prague," he bent the other, "and the third, Mr. Arnin, he had in Vienna," the third finger went down. "So——" he quickly unfolded his hand like a fan and made a waving gesture round his face—"Kira would have inherited most of his property, her brother was too crazy for real steady business, *vous comprenez*? And now I am most deeply sorrowful for you, Mr. Arnin, because you could have been a very rich man. And all this money wasted because of the stupid war and the robber Hitler. Bad. Too bad. What can I do for you?" He brushed his white overall with his three most expressive fingers and dropped a pink tablet into a rinsing glass.

"As I said before, Mr. Er . . ." Alexander tried to pronounce his name but failed right at the beginning.

"Call me *Pan*, it's Polish for mister. Don't bite at my hard name, please, it's bad for English teeth." The dentist roared with laughter: it was obviously his well-drilled

joke given to each new patient as an introduction to the chair.

"As I said before, Pan Er . . ." Alexander swallowed some saliva to ease his tongue. "I'd like to have your professional advice."

"Advice?" the dentist became a gynæcologist in a quick turn of voice and goggled confidentially.

"Could you tell whether this is Kira's tooth?" He showed it to him.

"It's impossible to tell at a glance, Mr. Arnin. One moment please. I shall consult my records."

He pulled out a card from his file, examined the diagram with the history of Kira's teeth on it, and nodded gravely:

"I knew that bit there would fall off. But Kira was in such a hurry."

"In a hurry, why?"

"She was going on a holiday, to Sicily I think. Yes, I am very positive, Kira mentioned Sicily."

"And you didn't treat the tooth?"

"No, Kira said she would see a dentist on arriving there. In Palermo. It is in Sicily, this Palermo, yes?"

"Yes, in Sicily. But why should she keep the broken-off bit?"

"Women are funny about things that belong to their body, Mr. Arnin. They often ask me for the teeth which I pull out. Just to show them to their husbands, they say. But do they? I don't know. It's that thing the archaeologists and the psychologists and I don't know who else talk so often about."

"The fetish?"

"So. You've said it exactly, Mr. Arnin. So." The dentist

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crooked his index finger and left it suspended over the chair like a hook.

In his shed for unusual hobbies Alexander searched for a post-war edition of the Palermo directory. He found it, jotted down the names and addresses of all the dentists there, and replaced the book on the shelf. As he did this, he noticed an inscription in pencil on the directory's spine. It read: *Beware of the spy*. It was Kira's writing, of course. Alexander did not find this snigger from beyond the grave either amusing or horrific. Nevertheless he noted the longing for a confession so characteristic of amateur spies, which Kira's novelistic trick had betrayed.

On the same day Alexander made two decisions, unconnected with one another, as always in his method of procedure. The first concerned a minor character, off-stage. He would send Commander Shrimp on holiday to Sicily. The second concerned a major character very much on-stage. He was going to devise a new series of trials for Dolores, but this time he would be her guide and also her interrogator.

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ONE

She lay on a tiger-skin, her long legs stretched out towards the camera, and he stood against the candlelight, with a sinister cigarette-holder in his grinning mouth. She was a dangerous spy, and very beautiful, and he was almost as dangerous and almost as beautiful. Both were ready to risk their lives for Emperor and country, but the country in each case happened to be different and the two Emperors were at war with each other. The cigarette-holder jerked and the mouth spat the final demand:

"Will you give me those plans of the great offensive your general staff has just prepared?"

"Yes. I'll bring them here tomorrow. And I'd do it again for you, because I love you more than Russia, Gerhardt." Tamara's legs, prolonged by the camera, made a voluptuous gesture in the air, and the candlelight flickered as Gerhardt stepped forward. Shifting his cigarette-holder to the corner of his mouth, he said slowly:

"You'll be shot for betraying your country, Tamara."

"A woman spy," she answered from the tiger-skin, "should never play with love."

A shower of music hit the screen, splashed, and then trickled down together with Tamara's tears, the largest tears the cinema had ever dared to show to the sentimental public all the world over.

Alexander had seen this late imitation of the Mata Hari

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myth at a Mexican cinema in a small desert town and it had struck him there as particularly irrelevant to his own spy story. Now he was going to re-enact the scene, although there would be no camera to prolong Dolores's legs, which were quite exciting enough as they were. The setting did not exactly correspond to the lovers' den of cinematic imagination: it lacked the tiger-skin, a strange omission, since Rita had managed to collect a number of moulting beasts, from a leopard to a sickly bear reinforced with some camel hair.

He himself was having a bath in the pink tub and saw a bottle of mineral water at the level of his head, on a plank lying across the tub. The second week of May had brought a change in the weather, and now the first warm air was trembling as high as Rita's window on the fourth floor.

Dolores was showing her legs; the excuse seemed to be a pair of green stockings she had just bought. She could not bear to be uncertain whether the new fashion was really meant for her: Alexander thought it the closest point of resemblance between his intention and the scene from the film which the hot water had somehow brought back to his memory.

"Dolores, would you do some spying for me? In your spare time, naturally."

She took it as a joke from the Shrimp box of tricks, and answered, first wrinkling her nose at the green colour on her knees.

"Is Shrimp dead then? It's all my fault, because I advised you to send him on a horribly dangerous mission. Do you like my horribly green stockings?"

"No, I mean yes, at least I like what's in them. But

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Commander Shrimp is very much alive. In his first letter from Sicily he said he would dispatch a proper report before the end of the week."

"Sicily must be simply heavenly in May." Her voice was once more an echo from a diplomatic party, and Alexander thought it appropriate to the situation he was laying before her.

"It's just marvellous," he imitated her affected tone. "Why aren't we there ourselves?"

"Why, indeed?" Dolores lowered her eyes and looked sadder for the green stockings doubled by the mirror.

Alexander promised himself not to fall into his own trap, as he had done with Kira; he would not respond to sudden moods of contrast which love orchestrates into a tender emotion, only to overwhelm the lover who submits to tenderness. Even a passing tremor of sadness in her voice or in her eyes gave him pain, that sharp twist of pain which the heart registers at the speed of a glance and forgets the next moment. One thing he wanted to avoid was hurting Dolores in any foreseeable way, and he trusted his skill in using the spy's lancet which his mind kept ready for just such an emergency.

But he had to be careful not to allow the soft plasma engendered by emotions to penetrate the cells of his brain. If his intelligence was ever to be used on Dolores like a lancet, it would be used on her brain but not on her heart. Perhaps this was a crueller decision by simple human standards. Not by his.

Slowly, weighing each word like a light petal on his tongue, he repeated his question:

"Dolores, would you do some spying for me?"

"What sort of spying?" She smiled, still treating the

subject as a soap bubble about to burst. She handed him a towel and removed the plank from the bath. All the time she looked aside: Dolores never watched his naked body outside the boundaries of love, which they both accepted as real for them only.

"The kind you can do," Alexander replied. "One shouldn't ask a potential agent for the impossible."

"But Shrimp has done nothing but the impossible. I want to be like my Shrimp." She pouted her large mouth and seemed more like an Aztec idol sulking in the sun than a capricious woman in the presence of her lover.

"Dolores, Shrimp specialises in the impossible. You're not a specialist yet."

"If you want me to play your little game, I shall be a specialist spy or nothing. *De acuerdo*, Alexander?"

"Yes, agreed." He was now out of the bath-tub, dry and ready to dress. Dolores collected his scattered clothes. This seemed the right moment to be more precise: "Let's start with the province of Las Monjas. What do you know of it now?"

"Las Monjas?" Dolores put on her wildly surprised mask, but she was surprised all the same, like a child finding real gunpowder in a toy cartridge. "I know nothing of Las Monjas, except its name. It's a province nobody with any common sense would go to, unless he happened to be appointed its governor. In my circle there simply wasn't any governor of Las Monjas, ex, present or about to be appointed."

Alexander put on a matter-of-fact voice:

"Oddly enough, Dolores, Las Monjas is going to be developed because of civil aviation, or so the well-informed whisper among themselves. But I would be less

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inclined to qualify it with so limiting an adjective. It's just aviation, things in the air, you know."

"In the air——" she echoed and stared at him from under the Daliesque painting. She had been living with Alexander in a measureless yet limiting space like the air he was talking about, and she could not be sure now whether he was taking her higher up, or bringing her down to earth, to its solid and measurable objects.

"Dolores," she heard her name spoken by the man whom she had entrusted with her love, "Dolores, perhaps it would be approaching the impossible, if you were soon to learn about the real state of affairs in the province of Las Monjas."

She watched Alexander make a masterly knot in his very long tie: the turning and winding of the two strips of silk seemed to hypnotise her every time.

"I will find out for you," she said almost automatically, still observing his hands.

And she did find out. Her digest of undercover information was also typed out and, like Kira's, had additional signs in pencil. But no dates. Again like Kira, Dolores had learnt something useful from Alexander's pedantic fondness for diagrams, maps and all kinds of graphic symbols.

Alexander knew the risks he was provoking with his first experiment on Dolores. In order to satisfy his calculating curiosity he had broken a silent pact between them and admitted a new factor into their obsession. The obsession had the simplicity of a hermit's trust in solitude, and after rising above props and masquerades had attained a strange harmony within itself. Now he had upset that harmony by allowing Dolores to wonder what the real

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meaning of his request was, and she, of course, would never end it by asking him for an explanation. She hated being inquisitive.

But he could help her by putting her unspoken questions into words. This he did the next afternoon they met, at Ela's flat. Naturally he was not interested in the information she had obtained for him; he had been in possession of it seven months earlier and could still feel professionally flattered that the results of his research were such a monument to intelligent pedantry. Diplomats acquired facts in the desultory manner of students: they either crammed them in or practised the art of skipping.

"Dolores, why did you do that work for me?" he asked her when they lay holding hands after making love. Dolores wore her wedding ring as usual.

"It wasn't work, it was playing a game. Xavier helped me."

"Who . . ." He stopped in case it was her husband's name, but she noticed his hesitation and said:

"Xavier is my little boy. He adores geography, Greek myths, me, grasshoppers and tunnels—in exactly that order. I don't mind coming after the myths, and geography is only a lot of myths mixed up with rivers, mountains and volcanoes. So you see, Alexander, my Xavier has a logical mind."

Then she asked him to knot his tie round her neck and play with its ends. The tie between her breasts shimmered like a stream or a lizard, both images born from myth. Dolores had sublimated the cruder element of erotic fantasies and was now able to evoke their nuances with an isolated symbol.

Alexander, however, would not let her escape from his

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interrogation, although he marvelled at the intuition with which she called a symbolic prop to the rescue, as if to exorcise his inquisitive words. Why then did he persist in breaking the spell?

"Why didn't you answer the point that mattered in my question?" he asked, squeezing her wrist a little too hard. She withdrew her hand and said at once:

"Because it would involve the morals of my own sex, and who am I to speak for all women?"

"You could try, Dolores."

"I suppose," she said, reaching for a cigarette, "all women, unless they aspire to be saints, feel that they are kept, and this awareness of being a kept woman goes very deep. Even a typist in an office or an overpaid film actress behaves on occasions like a moody mistress, throwing a fit of temper to remind the boss who pays her salary that the salary has not altered her status of a kept woman. I hope I am not right, but I believe, Alexander, that all women resent those who support them, whether they're husbands, office bosses or patrons of female talent. Hence their sudden urges to gain independence by being disloyal. Women, I suppose, are only loyal to their children and to love, because they imagine love to be a wandering child and they look after it well whenever it comes their way. Oh, I am so self-conscious now, Alexander; this is the longest monologue I have ever delivered in bed."

"I liked listening to it, Dolores."

"But that was another example of female behaviour. Few women have good brains, but give them love and let them relax afterwards, stretched out across the bed, and they will go up in flashes of sheer intelligence like rockets, perhaps in honour of their deity, the Moon."

She lit another cigarette and waited for his questions. Once he had ignored her warning, much more could be risked in open speech.

"Tell me, Dolores, how would you justify a woman's disloyalty which later turns out to be an act of treason by any standards?"

"Oh, how can one justify a thing which has become something else? I only know this: a woman will betray those who keep her for the sake of her lover, but he must be a real lover."

"What is a real lover, then?"

"A man who delivers us from the status of being kept women. He gives us no money in any direct or indirect form. It's better that he should be penniless, as in fairy-tales. But even this ideal has its perversion. Look at Ela and her dream lover Edmundo. Do you know why they quarrel so much?"

"No, tell me, Dolores." For the first time he found Ela's romantic muddle relevant to what he was putting on trial.

"Well, Edmundo is terribly rich, but so is Ela's husband. And yet she wants her ideal of a lover to leave a five-pound note on her bed each time they meet in secret. Edmundo gets very angry because he is rather stingy with money and, besides, he sees a sophisticated lady in Ela and not a prostitute. But for Ela this would be just a token of his love, a symbol, you might say."

"Yes, a symbol," Alexander echoed.

"He's not very well either."

"Who isn't, Dolores?"

"Edmundo. He has to see his doctor on the same mornings that he meets Ela. It's more convenient that way, you know. But then he complains to Ela that he has to un-

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dress so often. Braces down and braces up, he says, first the couch, then the sofa. It's so tiring to be a conscientious lover."

They both laughed and looked at themselves. The tie, too, was in a funny state, its knot loose and gaping.

Suddenly it occurred to Alexander that perhaps she had invented all those characters: Ela, Edmundo, Terry, and even Rita. He had so little proof of their existence. And was it not significant that she would not even try to believe in his Commander Shrimp?

TWO

Commander Pennyworth, shrimp-eyed and gaga as he was, had nevertheless a hardened reserve of common sense such as all professional spongers store up over the years: he delayed his return from Sicily, pretending that he had to follow up an extraordinary clue, with two sinister dentists visible at the end of the trail. His own false teeth were at stake, but he did not mind. Nor did the dentists mind electrocuting him in one of their chairs.

Yet the first fruits of his secretive labours, Shrimp reported, tasted of promise: hundreds of agents specialising in Central American affairs were soon to arrive in Palermo and chase one another all over the island, which was most attractive and not so expensive as Mr. Arnin might think.

All this had been communicated to Alexander in code. Arnin Senior had used a special description for this sort

of code: it was as breakable as Venetian glass transported to Greece in a Macedonian cart; and since he worked in transportation, the old man knew what he was talking about. Two agents had tried the same code before: the first lost his chief because of it, and the other got lost altogether; then the thing was shelved as a curiosity to be looked up by writers of spy stories for children. Shrimp must have read one such story and learnt it by heart.

Alexander had shown him Kira's digest of the prospects of Las Monjas, because the Commander badly needed to be impressed before going off on his own. The document, however, had little value by itself. It was the owner of the top copy who mattered. He could harm Alexander in the future, and for this alone the search went on.

Alexander sent a wire to Shrimp which said: "Facts and you wanted here." After spending his last liras Shrimp returned to Notting Hill, and presented himself the next day at Alexander's villa. He had a collection of facts which could be thinned out for at least an hour. That long he hoped to survive. The first item was the Top Copy, badly drummed out by the Commander on his landlady's typewriter, but one look from Alexander made even his shrimp eyes bulge in shame: the piece of paper landed in the fire-place.

When most of the items had been similarly discarded, Alexander asked for the bills. At least they might be genuine. Shrimp's own slips with current expenses were not, but some of them included quaint bits of local information.

"May 12th, nuts from a boy wearing an American baseball helmet, 95 liras.

"May 14th, offered a drink of water by a suspicious-

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looking priest with his feet in a bucket because of heat, 100 liras. N.B. overcharged."

Finally a tattered bill came up from a dentist. Dated nearly a year earlier, it was still unpaid. Alexander examined it against the light.

"Is it genuine, Commander?"

"Yes, sir." Shrimp addressed Alexander as 'sir' only when on duty; at other times he preferred to be chummy, calling him 'old boy' or just 'Arnin'. "I was clever, sir," he added, "the dentist didn't get the money out of me. Fancy charging two thousand liras for the extraction of a tooth already broken! The lady didn't turn up to pay it, the fellow said. I'm not surprised."

"I'll pay the bill, Commander."

"You will?" His eyes magnified their surprise to bursting-point. Shrimp gathered from the magnanimous tone of his employer that his Sicilian mission had not been an utter failure, and he made a mental note that he should bring far more bills next time.

Alexander was also surprised that the Commander had got hold of the right dentist after all. He had sent him there without any illusions as to his abilities. A mere decoy, Shrimp would have served Alexander's purpose by just loitering on the spot. The owner of the top copy, supposing he was on the look-out in Palermo, would have pounced on old Shrimp at once, for nothing could be closer to a foreigner's fantasies about British spies than this shrivelled character with peculiar eyes, willing to buy nuts from a Sicilian moron on the road. Since Shrimp had safely returned, Palermo was out of the picture.

The dentist's bill started a lively correspondence. Alexander sent three pounds in a letter, ignoring currency

regulations, and his generosity caused an explosion of hope at the other end. The dentist who had extracted Kira's tooth was no longer alive and his family, inspired by the three pound notes, showered Alexander with affection in their eloquent Anglo-Italian. Would he like to have a private dentist in London, all to his lordly self, who could also run a small and profitable *ristorante* in the back of his magnificent house? If that were not to his lordly liking, would he perhaps prefer a hard-working girl from Palermo who was anxious to cook enormous meals for his entire family?

From these hasty letters Alexander learnt a great deal about permits, visas, boats, and the vicissitudes of dentistry which had driven a good father to his grave. Kira certainly had her laugh at his expense by now, if laughter was what she wanted, and if she existed at all. A spy is always at an initial disadvantage when he takes an amateur seriously.

Meanwhile, a curious shift had occurred in Alexander's interests. Almost imperceptibly his spying habits began to feed on Dolores instead of Kira, as if the habits alone were in need of just such an unreasonable change.

Like a maniac he argued with himself that since Kira had spied against him for someone else, and since Dolores was capable of spying against someone else at a mere request from him, then his whole concept of insulated love had a crack in its heart. Assuming that isolation was maintained and protected by means of sets, curtains and screens, did it truly succeed in pushing other people's reality far beyond reach? And more: did this kind of perfect isolation remove all curiosity about what was going on behind those screens where she lived the greater part of her days? Was Dolores's privacy within their love exclusive, so exclu-

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sive that it had nothing in common with her privacy at home, in her doctor's consulting-room, at her bank?

In order to reassure himself that this perfect isolation had not cracked, he had to step outside and look at it through some of those curtains and screens. For a few moments at least. Surely this would not be too disloyal to Dolores. She need not know about his experiment; she would simply go on accepting their isolation as unaltered.

Most reassurances in a spy's life are derived this way: he often has to take off his theatrical mask, or to step out from behind a safe screen in order to see whether the mask still fits and the screen has no holes. Each test uncovers him for a moment and may cost him his life; yet danger is the quickest proof of safety.

Was Dolores a liar? he asked himself. She did not tell lies in bed; nor did she deceive his emotions when their bodies were not communicating with each other directly. Whatever she chose to tell him about her father, the diplomatic circle of bores and about her boy Xavier rang on the whole true because it was uttered with such a spontaneous informality.

But would she be equally truthful, if he touched on the other privacy of her life? After all, she had given him a subtle warning at the very beginning when their love was still hidden beneath a smart cynical affair. Should he now respect her warning, or, on the contrary, look for the motive behind it?

Her husband, who in all probability had returned to London from *la capital*, remained a taboo for both of them, and Alexander thought it still the least suspicious clause in their unspoken agreement. But there were other

far subtler taboos, which Dolores set up like little crouching statues all round their secluded stage. And he accepted them without questioning their purpose.

Who, for instance, was the real Terry in Dolores's life? Yes, he had wondered about that when they were in his shabby room, but Dolores had soon taken his mind off Terry by never using his place as their *pied-à-terre*. And how could a person of Dolores's background ever have struck up a friendship with a shady character like Rita, the wardrobe Amazon? Dolores made a point of never discussing those people in relation to herself, not even Ela and her husband, whom she obviously met in her official circles as well.

Once again Alexander was faced with the alternative that these characters were mere inventions. He had better see to that too. What would Kira have done, if he had asked her point blank about her theatricals off the domestic stage? True, he had not asked her, because he did not even bother to suspect that there were quite a few rehearsals going on off-stage, while he was abroad and sometimes during his sojourns at home.

But what Kira had occasionally told him, directly or through her exercises in the epistolary style, bore little resemblance to her life as he now knew it. Perhaps she did not mean to lie: she merely distorted the facts to fit her own pattern for their marital life.

Here, precisely here, lay a double temptation for Alexander. Since he could not be sure of Kira's attitude to him as both husband and stranger, how could he take Dolores's love on absolute trust? About Kira he had found out so much—he had been forced to find out by one whiff of scent—and still could not see himself clearly in direct

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relation to her. About Dolores he had found out nothing, because that was the most reasonable price for their isolation; and yet how could he claim that love possessed all the secrets of clairvoyance in a given relationship?

The double temptation therefore involved Dolores as much as Kira. Why not use a dead medium to spy on a living person? Why not make Dolores do what Kira had or might have done? The first test with Dolores collecting information for him had proved by way of analogy that she could illuminate some of Kira's motives and herself be partly illuminated by Kira, or rather by his knowledge of Kira.

But above all other reasons Alexander was responding to this double-faced temptation because it showed his own obsession in its two parallel mirrors, the mirrors in turn echoing the reflection farther and farther away, until a speck like a spy's alert eye remained in the distance, winking at him knowingly. Now at last he discovered a spy's excuse for this sordid situation: Dolores versus Kira; he had been trapped by the two mirrors and could not escape their multipliable reflections, unless one of the mirrors shattered the other.

Mirrors are united in an aping conspiracy all the world over, to confound and unnerve the perfect spy.

With her name it was quite easy. He became a devout reader of the best glossy magazines and studied the half-frozen smiles of humanity posing before the camera. Diplomatic smiles had the superiority of ice embracing a champagne bottle: they were there to keep the whole social business cool, while the corks would now and again pop up noisily for the lower breeds of snobs.

The half-frozen smile of Dolores did not photograph all

that well. Alexander spotted it on a page of society gossip, where photographs were put in three rows, as for a parade, with captions underneath calling the smiles above to attention.

Dolores stood there, a tall glass in her hand, exchanging grins with a couple of toothy gentlemen who, the caption informed him, were about to leave for Peru. This was a cheerful piece of news, Alexander gathered, for the faces on the photograph were throwing grins in all directions.

Her married name was not Spanish at all: it was French, but it went well with Dolores. At once he realised how this simple discovery strengthened her independence. Dolores de Rouge-Ferrac sounded very convincing, but the surname taken by itself seemed like an annex to her personality, differently furnished and much lived in, though he would never be welcomed there.

Señor de Rouge-Ferrac was hardly visible on the photograph, his head turned away from the guests of honour and shining with its bald crown. This disdainful movement of the bald head registered an uncertainty in Alexander's memory. He had met a number of Latin Americans whose names were Irish, French or German, but how could he have missed this one, so obviously entitled to be a self-sufficient snob? From the bit shown on the photograph he could not imagine the rest of his face: did he wear a moustache, were his lips thick, what colour were his eyes?

This uncertainty about the name and the face stayed throughout Alexander's sleep and became his waking thought. He had a childish urge to hear the full name spoken aloud, by Dolores or by her husband. To satisfy his wish he had to ring her up unexpectedly, at the wrong

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hour. He did so soon after breakfast. At first he thought it was a servant saying the usual *Diga*. When he persisted in not answering, the voice said grumpily and in English: "Count de Rouge-Ferrac speaking."

Alexander replaced the receiver.

Then the uncertainty began to grow like a balloon with a voice bouncing and screeching inside it. The balloon was an overstretched simile of the bald head, and it swayed grotesquely before Alexander's thoughts. He had seized so little of her husband's reality, only a patch from the photograph and a few sounds from the telephone, and yet they represented the whole living body of the man. The taboo was taking on flesh.

Alexander nagged his thoughts to show him crudely how those two slept together, how their hands and legs touched one another, how they breathed in the dark. But could she really sleep with him now? No, Dolores would never do it. But Dolores de Rouge-Ferrac did and would—now and later—her legs stretched out towards the camera of Alexander's doubt.

THREE

Alexander looked again at their time-table and the intimate map of London he had prepared for Dolores early in the spring. He drew up a counter-map in which the signs indicating the safe places and hours were replaced by equally pedantic squares and circles, showing the danger spots with fully-coloured approval.

It took him one afternoon to work out the consistencies within the blank spaces in her haphazard time-table: they seemed to conform to a pattern.' Most haphazard activities conform to a pattern, Arnin's father had maintained, puffing at his Turkish pipe, and he had proved his conviction to be true in the Mediterranean belt, famous for the reliability of the sun and the inconsistency of man.

Dolores's pattern revealed two half-hours, rigidly observed by her on alternative days, despite the shifting arrangements round about them. The first half an hour came at ten, and the other at five in the afternoon. Alexander did not dispute her right to keep these half-hours exclusively to herself, and it had never crossed his mind to upset her private arrangements. Now he felt curious, not so much about the actual times set aside, but rather about their regularity in her other open life.

Dolores was always punctual, he admitted, with a pedant's appreciation, and she guarded their share of leisure with jealous care. This she did, of course, to protect their seclusion from intruders, even if they were only unforeseen snags due to bad weather, rush-hours and indigestion. Her strict observance of those half-hours over the months of their obsessive passion suggested a similar care and a similar involvement worth caring about.

It seemed so harmless to get closer to that other thing by upsetting her time-table a little; and Alexander was a master in this respect, because nobody would suspect a pedant like him of wilful carelessness. Should he choose to be three hours late, any excuse on his part would do, and he enjoyed seeing people worried by his lapses. A pedant's reputation is the easiest to keep up.

So he snatched sometimes ten, sometimes twenty

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minutes from their early afternoons or late evenings, confused her driving route by selecting a café in an overcrowded street or making her miss a petrol station when she had a long way to go afterwards. These simple devices had the virtue of being both obtrusive and too petty to spoil their temper.

After a series of such preparations, Alexander embarked on a more bullying scheme. He wanted to meet Dolores on a day and at a time they had never so far included in their plans.

"Why not Tuesday for a change?" he asked when they were lunching at a cheap Cypriot restaurant in Kilburn. "Tuesday is going to be my very lucky day, according to the stars in this paper." He showed her the column in a woman's magazine which she had bought from an invalid newspaper vendor.

Dolores tossed her hair back and the heavy ear-rings glistened in the light from the window. He knew this gesture so well: it signified denial or refusal, but the words that followed usually expressed only a mild astonishment.

"But Alexander," she framed his name in a smile, "you might be very unlucky according to the magazine I left at home. Besides, Monday is before Tuesday, and I'll have such a big load of adoration stored up for you during the week-end. So Monday then, at Ela's. Right?"

Alexander was sitting in front of a horrid landscape with a very blue bay, a yellow boat and a cluster of disgruntled cypresses above, all squeezed into a panel on the wall. It was amazing how a pictorial banality of that sort could work through his irritation and help him to be obstinate. He took another eyeful of inspiration from the cypresses and said:

"Right. We'll make it both Monday and Tuesday. Five twenty on Tuesday; I simply feel that itch of destiny in the old Zodiac."

Dolores tossed her hair again, and the only sign of annoyance was the swaying glitter of the ear-rings. Her manners, so precise yet never strained, would not allow her to express sudden vexation too clearly. That she preferred to get from her surroundings, from people and things. And she even liked the momentary exhibitions of temper in Alexander and the permanent irritation emanating from cheap places like this one.

She would insist on having their rare meals together at the Cypriot restaurant where all the waiters thought her beautifully mad and stared at her shamelessly while she ate *shashlik* under the dreadful mural. It was like becoming someone quite different, she would explain to him; a Greek refugee perhaps, waiting to be smuggled to America, and he, Alexander, would provide her with false papers in exchange for her virtue and her ear-rings. "Take my ear-rings then," she would say at the end of her piece, unclipping them and dangling them over a copper jug with Turkish coffee. Now she only felt for them to know whether they were still under her ears.

"Well, Dolores?" he said almost as briskly as when he used to fix their dates a week in advance.

"Five-twenty, you know, would be rather difficult for me. And on Tuesdays Ela's flat is simply full of husbands, actual and divorced. A sort of sentimental Tuesday At Home for Ela, you know." Dolores smiled, hoping that this would give a humorous slant to her polite refusal. But Alexander had before him an encouraging model of vulgarity on the wall, so he went on repeating his request.

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It was an appalling lesson in the abuse of diplomacy by love.

"You don't want to do it for me, and that's that," he played the part of a sulky lover with a whim on his mind.

"You mustn't say things like that, Alexander." Her face was suddenly drawn, giving the lips a prominence that could swell into fury. For a moment she looked more Indian to him than in those spasmodic silences after the acts. "I would do anything for you," she whispered, aware of the waiter's gaping. Her eyes were in the shadow, deeper and sadder, but Alexander avoided them, thinking instead of how Countess de Rouge-Ferrac might word the phrase he had just heard. It would probably be toned down to: "I shall do all I can."

"I am sorry, I didn't mean to offend you," he said after a while.

"Nobody can offend me, not even you." It was the chilliest thing she had ever uttered in his presence. And because he knew her surname and her husband's conceited voice, the sentence rose to the blotchy ceiling of the restaurant and looked down on him. She lied with an aristocratic derision: he had offended her.

Then events followed in quick succession. Dolores had said on parting that she would do her best to be free on Tuesday afternoon, not before half-past five, though. Since Ela's flat would not be available, she might try Terry, but only as a last resort. She was consistent in honouring his dislikes, and Alexander still maintained the same acrid tone whenever Terry cropped up in their conversation.

When they met on Monday, Dolores was not sure about

the final arrangements, and asked him to give her the usual double ring on the telephone the following morning. If she could come, she would merely say 'Yes' on picking up the receiver for the second time. Dolores very calmly discussed all the possible details: a new café they should choose for Tuesday, a place for parking, and so forth. At this point in his calculation Alexander liked neither her self-possession nor his own relentless cunning. They had both begun to spin pirouettes on the verge of their isolation.

She said "Yes" when he dialled her number for the second time. According to their emergency plan, Dolores was to park her car with his fake plate at the back, somewhere between Gloucester Road Underground station and a pub they had spotted in a square behind the station. She would not be there earlier than quarter to six; she did not want him to loiter in the back streets of a semi-respectable district. One could only loiter, she observed, in a respectable or a disreputable district; anywhere else it looked suspicious.

On that afternoon before their meeting Alexander put his little scheme into operation. Its objective was one of the sacred half-hours. He hired a car for a day, parked it at the shady end of the crescent where His Would-be Excellency lived with Dolores in a marital state of deceit. He had driven in about four o'clock, spread a newspaper on his knees and read, his hand on the wheel. At a quarter past four Dolores stepped out of the house, walked to her car and started the engine.

Alexander experienced a double pleasure of recognition. There she was, at the wheel, her head peering out of the window: his Dolores and Dolores de Rouge-Ferrac.

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Which of the two fascinated him more now; which would in the final stage outwit him like Kira?

Driving after her car, Alexander recalled the remark she had once made about modern lovers being transported by a motorised Cupid. How useful and discreet a car was, she had said; few people would bother to peep into a car passing by. No other vehicle had the same ability to carry a secret from place to place.

Ironically enough, Dolores's praise of secrets on wheels applied to the car he was driving. His ungentlemanly pursuit could not be noticed by her; and as she speeded her car, he speeded his, sure that nothing would go wrong. And not a single passer-by looked at him from the pavement—so she was right on that score, too.

The traffic along the King's Road helped him to merge his petty secret with thousands of others; he followed her into South Kensington, then through Cromwell Road into a quiet side street, until she finally stopped by a telephone-box.

Dolores got out, and he saw her search for something in her large handbag. Then she crossed the street, glanced back, and walked on unperturbed. At the corner she ran quickly up a few steps, opened a grated door with a key and disappeared for at least twenty minutes. Alexander returned to his newspaper.

When she came out from round the corner Alexander could clearly see a well-matched smile she was wearing like make-up for her own admiration. She dropped the key into her deep bag and greeted her small car with another smile. From his hiding-place Alexander loved Dolores for this childlike miming before an imaginary public, and the telephone-box seemed to applaud her with

its newly-painted red. Again like a curious girl she touched the paint to see whether it was dry. It must have been, because she nodded to her fingers and stepped quickly into the car.

Alexander could not find out more about the house at the corner: he had to follow her on. Now she drove very fast, passing the traffic lights in the nick of time, a hard test for his carmanship. At one point when crossing Queen's Gate he nearly bumped into a post office messenger-boy on a bicycle, and this reminded him of one of the graphic foot-notes on his ingenious map.

Dolores drove into the park and halted by a cafeteria which stood in the summer bloom of its red and yellow umbrellas. From one of the tables an elderly woman got up and walked towards the barrier with a little boy whose arresting beauty made everybody acknowledge it with staring surprise. The boy had black hair and unusually long eyelashes which emphasised his likeness to Dolores.

A head topped with a minute beret emerged through the car's window, and the boy covered it with energetic kisses, upsetting the hair and the beret. The elderly woman waited near-by like a prudent guardian angel taking terrestrial rest in snatches. Then they all drove away.

Alexander was left with half an hour to spare, still determined to continue his ignominious scheme. He went back to the side street off Cromwell Road, parked in the spot she had chosen for her car and had a look at the house with the grated door.

An Indian with a medical textbook under his arm stood on the doorsteps wondering whether he should go in. He held a Yale key in his thin brown hand. A key, much

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bigger and clumsily old-fashioned, was painted above the entrance next to the word *Flatlets* in fanciful lettering. The Indian student decided to go in after all, and Alexander could just catch a glimpse of an endless dark corridor.

On purpose he left his car where it was, by the telephone-box, and went on foot towards the semi-respectable neighbourhood of Gloucester Road Station which must have snouted its way out of the earth like a dying mole. He saw her car from a distance, a neon-feathered cock reflecting light on it from the public house.

The first thing she showed him with a gay swing of the hand was the key. She was so proud of having it that she held it between her teeth while she drove and muttered her bits of conversation. She noticed from afar that her parking-space was taken and said, loudly dropping the key into her lap:

"What a nuisance. That's the best spot around here. But that fat old businessman has pinched it from me. I thought he was following me for my gorgeous hair, but the nasty brute was after my genius for parking. I really do have a genius for it, you know."

"Yes, you have, Dolores."

She gave him another key from her bag, told him the number of the house and the number of the flat on the top floor, asked whether he had a box of matches in case he missed a switch on his way up; then she got out and kissed him through the window:

"I'll go first, come ten minutes after me and ignore the Asiatic characters popping in and out of the lavatories. They're quite timid really."

She vanished like a lady on a charitable mission, and

Alexander, staring vacantly in front of him, realised that he had forgotten to put up the window of his car. He did it on the way to the flatlets.

An hour later as he poured the last drops of sparkling Italian wine into her glass, he asked her in his least suspecting manner:

"Who is the love-abiding citizen I should be grateful to, this time?"

This sounded a little too indirect for Dolores's liking, and she made a vague gesture towards the plywood cupboard in front of the divan.

"This room, you mean."

"Yes, this room, Dolores."

"Oh, well," her hair moved with a jerk, and she got up, stepping straight into her shoes. "We must for once respect the privacy and modesty of a generous man."

"Oh, he's a man then?"

"Very much so, Alexander." She walked about the room, putting things in order, and he knew quite well that this was not the moment to re-word the same question.

On their way to her car, they deposited the bottle with an Italian label inside the newly-painted telephone kiosk. She childishly hoped it might persuade the next user of the telephone to spend fourpence on a romantic call. As for Alexander, he thought of the hired car: he should ring up the firm to send a man to collect it before midnight.

Alexander slept very well that night and in the morning after his two cups of strong coffee went first to his shed and then to the flatlets. Another Indian stood on the doorstep waiting for the rain to pass. He had no book under his arm but looked most studious with his splendid thick glasses.

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Alexander rang the bell and as the rain stopped pelting through the leaves, the maid opened the door, gave him a cautious stare and said: "It's full up. Try next week. Good-bye."

"Just a moment," Alexander said firmly, then glanced over his shoulder to see whether the Indian was gone. He was. "I'm from the police."

Alexander passed a library membership card on a leather backing under the maid's eyes, and was once again astonished to note how with most people a good professional gesture counts more than a document. But unlike a policeman he gave the girl a ten-shilling note. She did not mind this inconsistency.

"It's better that the owners shouldn't know of my visit, you understand."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, let's go up and talk on the way, shall we, Miss——"

"Peggy Smith, sir." She led him up to the first landing.

"How many Egyptian nationals live here, do you happen to know?"

"None, sir."

"I see." They walked on in silence. "And who has these two flats, Peggy?" he asked when they reached the top floor.

"Number 38 is unoccupied, sir, and 39 was taken yesterday, no—I beg your pardon, sir—the night before."

"By whom?"

"I'll see in the book downstairs."

"Please do." They returned to the ground floor. The house seemed completely empty. Peggy Smith fetched a

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greasy black volume and turned a few pages at the back.

"It's a Mr. Alexander Arnin, sir," the maid whispered with a slow confidential nod. "Company director, it says here. Sounds kind of respectable, sir."

"Yes, quite respectable."

On the way out he gave her another ten-shilling note for this unwitting compliment.

FOUR

"Tell me, Commander, what sort of outfit would you organise to get a few odd characters together?"

"How odd, sir?" Shrimp asked very sensibly, his eyes bulging at a bottle of whisky by Alexander's side.

"Really odd, Commander."

"Wouldn't a ping-pong outfit serve your purpose, sir? Found from experience most batty chaps go for the bat like hell." He chuckled, his red veins swelling ominously on his nose and on his temples. "The bat, hha!" He laboured his pun with a hollow laugh.

"No, I don't think table-tennis would somehow appeal to them." Alexander suddenly imagined Rita in slacks playing against Terry in the nude, and he burst out laughing.

Commander Pennyworth took it to be a sociable noise and skilfully pushed the bottle close to Alexander's elbow. At the slightest move now he was bound to notice it. Alexander did, and asked Shrimp to deal with the cork. The Commander appreciated the friendliness of the

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request, opened and poured the whisky in a remarkably short time.

"Delighted to be entrusted with your confidence again, Arnin," he barked before gulping the drink down. Whisky restored his waning wits and he corrected himself smartly—"sir."

"My characters are interested in the more intricate subtleties of sex, if you see what I mean. That's precisely what makes them odd, Commander."

"Could that perhaps come under a mystical outfit, sir?" Shrimp had an air of outlandish wisdom about his red face and the glass he was filling up.

"Come again, Commander?" Alexander swallowed a little of his whisky to grasp Pennyworth's juxtaposition more easily.

"Those chaps from India, sir—they turn up with a message every eleventh year——" he did not explain why it was the eleventh and not the tenth or thirteenth year. "Talked to hundreds of them, sir. Very keen on love, those chaps with a message, sir. Very keen."

"Well, prepare your mystical outfit for me, Commander. And help yourself to some more whisky."

"Thank you, sir. Most hospitable of you, old chap." He was getting drunk and redder under the ears. The ears were so shrunk from old age that they looked as if they might drop off any minute. "But, Arnin," he whispered in a hoarse voice, "must have a special allowance for a meal at a Pakistani restaurant. Hate curry dishes, though. Intensely." His mouth had a thirsty appearance and it twitched until he got two pounds from Alexander.

"Leave everything to me, Arnin. Shan't disappoint you, sir. Two quid, jolly decent, old boy," he mumbled as he

got up. "Good-bye, Arnin sir, good-bye." He staggered out of the house.

Commander Pennyworth 'did not disappoint Alexander. On the twenty-first of June he produced a brief outline of his plan with an appendix. The appendix turned out to be a very impressive invitation card, with a few phrases in capital letters.

"YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN"—it read—"to discuss the mystical secrets of love with the Indo-Aryan Sage NIDAG-NUG, on his first spiritual visit to the erring sister Europe."

Then followed more prosaic details, the date and the place of the meeting, together with a strong plea against giving the sage any material donations. This made it look truly mystical and loving, Shrimp explained. Underneath, in capital letters again, the master of this absurd concoction advertised his trustworthy social standing:

"CHAIRMAN AND INTERPRETER:

COMMANDER A. P. B. PENNYWORTHING, R.N.V.R."

Alexander noticed the address and said:

"Surely your place is too small for the meeting."

"The landlady you so kindly selected for me, sir, has a parlour as she calls it, which is both big and very spiritual. Female spiritualists, sir, meet ghosts there once a fortnight, male ghosts usually, because I hear them dance from my room on the first floor. Good old-fashioned music. Mainly waltzes, sir."

Alexander was anxious to go back to the essentials. He praised Shrimp's idea as a whole, the Indo-Aryan sage and the choice of the parlour. With modesty and brief modulated grunts, the Commander drew Alexander's attention to the less apparent subtleties of his outfit.

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"It's based on the Gunga Din formula. Never fails, Arnin. Tried it many times. All over India too, sir——" He grunted with full respect.

"How does Kipling enter into this? I can't quite follow you, Commander."

"You know the poem 'Gunga Din', old boy? Sonorous piece. Long. Reads well in empty places. The Cockney trick makes it vulgar, of course, but well—there's nothing else like the old Din. Hha!" Shrimp chuckled and rubbed his shrivelled hands.

"Go on, Commander."

"Ever tried to recite it backwards?"

"No. It never occurred to me."

"It occurred to me thirty years ago, Arnin—sir. Double-backwards I think it should be called. Not just lines read out from the last to the first, that's too simple; any fool can spot the trick. But the double-backwards recitation creeps letter by letter, old boy, all the way up to the infernal beginning."

"How very tiresome, Commander."

"But also effective, sir. Learnt the whole 'Nidag-Nug' by heart."

"Wait a minute, Commander. You've mentioned the Indian's name."

"That's the chap from the poem in double backwards."

"I see."

"Well, sir, I taught the Pennyworth version all over the civilised and double-backward world. Hha! That's rather good! Taught some natives in North India, too. The blasted thing was recorded by some mad philologists recently, I understand. No one has spotted old Kipling,

sir: no one ever will, I bet you, old boy. Trust an expert on North India."

"How did you come to serve with the Indian Army? I always believed you were in the Navy, Commander."

"Liaison work, sir. That's how the Navy comes in. India, China, the Bahamas too. Seem to do liaison jobs all my life. Even this little outfit for you, Arnin, is liaison in a way, isn't it?"

"Yes, Commander, I think you're right. But how will you get your Nidag-Nug in the flesh?"

"I've got him, sir. Remember the two quid, and that Pakistani restaurant? Awful curry, hate the stuff. But a waiter I know there has a good memory, like those chaps I taught in North India. Besides, his day off coincides with the date of our little meeting, if you see my point, sir."

"Yes, rather," said Alexander. He found himself wishing that Shrimp were thirty years younger and might keep him company in those humourless places between the Andes and the Gulf of Mexico. Then he humbly advanced him a few pounds for hiring a naval uniform from the usual establishment.

The invitations were expensively printed and he slipped them himself into the letter-boxes of the three flats he had visited with Dolores. Since he did not know the full names of their owners he used his ignorance for an additional mystic effect. The invitations were addressed to Ela, Rita and Terry respectively, each envelope scented with something mustily Oriental.

And they all came on the evening of June the thirtieth; so they were real, and not obsessional figments of imagination. Through the thin spiritualist curtain dividing the ghoulish parlour into equal parts, Alexander watched

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them enter. Some seats were already occupied by the followers of Nidag-Nug, all enlisted by Shrimp for a few shillings from the kitchen vaults of the same restaurant. Shrimp had persuaded them to wash their turbans for the great occasion.

Nidag-Nug, the gifted waiter, was still upstairs in the Commander's room, running through the double-backward text which had been chopped up into sections of different length for the purpose of mystic comments.

Alexander had no difficulty in recognising the first guest of honour. He was so obviously a nudist in disguise: his trousers did not fit, his collar was too loose and his tie crooked; and as for his sandals, they had more slashes and holes than leather, perhaps with the intention of revealing the nudity of Terry's dainty feet. After glancing at the landlady's photograph by the door, he made straight for the youngest curry expert in the first row, sat down behind him and observed the impassive back of the turban.

An anxious thought crossed Alexander's mind: that the three of them might be the best of friends, cultivated by Dolores as a crazy team, and he began to feel nervous about the next arrival. It was a double arrival, as Shrimp might have said with a significant "hha", because Ela brought her ideal lover with her.

They formed a striking couple of the picturesque sort that would, without fail, stir up a sleepy music-hall audience in a provincial town. Ela was like a tropical bird, on thin but pretty legs, very agile and colourful, with trim, high hips, around which, one felt, a ring of plumes would be the most natural adornment.

She did not walk with Edmundo, she fluttered about him like a twittering creature from a forest cage, and he,

with a slow beast's indifference, waddled on, regardless of Ela and everything else in the parlour. He probably did not know where he was, why he had come, and certainly did not listen to what Ela was lisping away in Portuguese.

Edmundo resembled a tired alligator dragged out of his comfortable mud and longing to get back to it. Those who looked at his eyes as he crawled by could not help yawning, for his heavy grey eyelids moved up and down, uncovering two colourless lenses for brief moments only.

Yet he carried with him a weird fascination which his over-tailored suit emphasised. His athletic buttocks pressed at his trousers, his shoulders upheld padding like immense coat-hangers, his chest begged for a furious punch: Edmundo was the South-American ideal of a virile man. Sensitive Terry felt his presence in the room at once. He gave up the impassive turban and tried his best to attract Edmundo to his row. Whether it was the stuffy air or Ela's bird-like hopping, Edmundo responded too quickly and collapsed on to a chair two rows behind Terry.

Now Terry became his exhibitionist self, fidgeting and jumping up from his seat, his sunburnt ageless face turned back towards the exotic brute held prisoner by that nasty little bitch.

Five minutes before Nidag-Nug was due to make his mystical entry, the last character from Dolores's supporting cast thrust her red head into the parlour. The hair had such an intensity of colour that in the electric light it seemed aflame. What the red liveliness, however, subtracted from her age, vertical lines all round her mouth added on, suggesting the approach of the cruel fifties.

If Alexander had been prone to shocks, he would certainly have experienced one on seeing her slither in

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like a viper. Of course, it was Rita, straight from her Daliesque pictures, her pink tub and A Girl's Practical Wardrobe. As Dolores's live puppet, Rita would merely have proved her reality to Alexander, but as Kira's Miss Scarlet Sin she confirmed one more clue, and the possible ramifications that might spring from this could entangle not only him but also Dolores and her husband.

No, there was no doubt about it: she stood in the middle of the parlour, short-sighted, red as a squirrel and greedy to see a new box of sex tricks open up five inches away from her eyes. Kira had never referred to her as Rita; she had summed up her personality in a nickname, and about Miss Scarlet Sin, Alexander was no more in the know than Nurse Thompson was about Mrs. Antique and the other visiting ladies.

* * * * *

Kira had gossiped about her with Alexander, because it had suited her teasing method with men and, though a husband, he was none the less a man, more good-looking, she had to admit, than any other she would be likely to hook in an emergency. Kira's particular interest in her red-haired friend had an unusual erotic flavour: Miss Scarlet Sin was supposed to teach her voice production, but instead became her adoring slave, drawing the melancholy Kira in bed, the wistful Kira with a towel in the bath and the hesitant Kira in the nude.

"Alee, my darling Alee," she would say with a why-don't-you-seduce-me-now gaze, patiently prolonged, "Miss Scarlet Sin has given me another collection of her photographs, the red She in the most alluring poses this time.

Would you like to see them? They're rather amusing. Especially those in theatrical costumes; just naughty bits and pieces, look——"

Alexander saw some of them, mainly the undressed ones, and even commented politely on the smallness of the knees. But, outside gossip, he was not granted the pleasure of meeting the photogenic lady face to face. Kira had kept her enchained to Kira the high priestess, telling Alexander from time to time:

"Alee, darling, I must have that wicked look of a male underneath. Poor, poor woman, she's so desperately in love with me. What should I do, Alee darling?"

* * * * *

Now, the Nidag-Nug show was about to begin, and Alexander rushed upstairs to add his own idea to the Commander's programme. This sudden idea concerned Miss Scarlet Sin. The Pakistani cooks and dish-washers clapped in unison when Shrimp in his hired Navy uniform appeared against the curtain, presenting the Indo-Aryan mystic, as if he had only just materialised from a medium's gullet. Four rows of ribbons on Shrimp's chest suggested a world-wide chase of fame, and all the turbans nodded approvingly whenever he struck his chest just there, to emphasise a rhetorical question. It was a woolly speech about the erring sister Europe and the special light brought from Asia, about Nidag-Nug's sublimation through sex and his intuitive choice of those to be illuminated on the ancient isles of Great Britain.

The mystical visitor would only answer questions, and in his own sacred dialect which Commander Pennyworth-

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ing should be able to translate adequately. Edmundo remained unperturbed; he obviously did not think much of the waiter's Indo-Aryan demeanour. His sleepy eyelids lowered, he watched Terry wriggling in his seat like a boy with too much water in his bladder. Terry wanted to impress Edmundo; he was first therefore to ask a question.

"Would Nidag-Nug kindly enlighten me," he said in a piping voice, "as to whether a decisive sexual orientation may be redirected with the help of a mystical push." He pronounced the word push almost rudely but ended on a higher note: "I hope I've expressed myself clearly."

Shrimp nodded gravely and recited the last three lines of 'Gunga Din' double-backwards, to which the waiter replied at once with the double-backward passage describing Din's death.

"No " said Shrimp in plain English. "No re-directing permitted by Nidag-Nug, either mystical or Indo-Aryan. Stay where you are, he says."

Terry was very pleased; he gave Edmundo a special wink in the nude, but the human alligator had his eyes firmly shut.

Alexander in his suspicious mood was quite convinced that Dolores must have tried to help Terry in some perverse occasional desire to be normal. Kira's example with the boy Maurice came to his mind as a convenient analogy. And Rita linked it further.

Now it was Ela who asked a question, her taffeta dress rustling smartly and glistening. But since she delivered it half in broken English and half in rapid Portuguese, neither Nidag-Nug nor his interpreter were able to illuminate her doubts. The Pakistani claque murmured in unison, admiring the exotic lady, and this had to do for

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an answer. Ela, puzzled and put out, turned to Edmundo for consolation, but the tired alligator was sound asleep. Alexander watched on through the peep-hole between the folds of the curtain.

Finally, Alexander's trap was set for Rita. He had to be absolutely sure that it was the same woman who loved both Dolores and Kira, wooing them with her photographs and costumes.

The trap worked: she did ask a question, and it turned out to be a very innocent attempt to get Nidag-Nug's blessing exclusively for herself. Old Shrimp remembered the instruction well; he whispered something double-forward into the waiter's ear, and the waiter extended his bony arms, muttered inaudibly, and then cried out twice: "Ki-ra, Ki-ra!"

Edmundo woke up, Ela burst into tears, and Miss Scarlet Sin in the flesh lay between the chairs, unconscious. The turbans bowed to her in mystic amazement, but she came to very quickly, and without anybody's help got up from the floor, pulled her skirt up and rushed to Nidag-Nug.

The waiter was frightened and tried to hide behind the spiritualist curtain, but Rita managed to kiss his left shoe just in time.

FIVE

Alexander had a new key cut for him. It was, after all, Dolores's wish that he should carry his set of keys to the flats they had acquired on trust and loan. When he

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borrowed her key to Rita's studio to have his own cut, Dolores seemed to be flattered by the return of his pedantic habits and thanked him with a bunch of fresh smiles.

She saw in the key a sign pointing to their *status quo*: all the clandestine pleasures behind locked doors, and theirs the right to open them at idiosyncratic times. From now on then, he would be as secretive as before. No questions and no knocking on taboos.

Relieved by this change in him, Dolores brought out her favourite puppets to celebrate the occasion.

"Edmundo is getting married," she said.

"To Ela?"

"No, of course not. To a wife."

"I see," said Alexander.

He did see, and it was a fantasy backed with the remembered reality of Ela and her drowsy lover in the parlour amidst a pious congregation of chairs. They seemed to be waiting for Nidag-Nug to bring a wife for Edmundo, and Shrimp wore a hired cassock with a sash. This grotesque scene fled at the sound of Dolores's question:

"Alexander, do we go to Rita's place on Monday?"

"Yes, on our usual Monday."

Though the phrase had an air of dullness about it, she trusted the tone and liked the sound of the usual Monday.

On Monday, however, he dialled her number twice at eleven; then went by taxi to an espresso bar in High Street Kensington and found her waiting for him. She had come earlier. Alexander explained that he had urgent business on hand, which meant missing their usual Monday. Dolores did not ask what business it was, but remarked in passing:

"Rita is out of town. Can't tell her about the change of plan."

"She needn't know," Alexander said. "And we'll be there in spirit."

Dolores smiled, but her eyelashes cast small shadows trembling at the edges.

At two o'clock Alexander entered Rita's flat. The curtains were drawn, so he pulled them aside and opened the huge window, letting the sun in with the noise of traffic. A bridge of light rose over the pink tub and reached the wardrobe. Another flash shot out of the mirror and hit the telephone hanging from the wall. Its dark surface glittered back.

Surrounded by so much brilliance in the air, Alexander viewed the prospect of the search with optimism. After all, they had not outwitted him for good. If Rita had kept some of Kira's scribbles, he was bound to get hold of them in one of those drawers.

Since the wardrobe was Rita's chief pride, its drawers must share the honour and, no doubt, guarded the Amazonian secrets. He pulled out the middle drawer by the row of dresses. It was heavy with trinkets, brass plates and hairy masks.

A stampede of buses below deafened the noise he was making: he neither heard the click of the key, nor saw her enter. Suddenly a shouting voice roused him from his absorption.

"A man in my wardrobe! How dare you!"

Alexander turned round.

"Who are you? I am not in the least afraid of your gun. Drop it and answer my questions."

Alexander recognised the voice and the red hair flaming

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in the sun. For a long while he preferred to be silent, then, seeing her shake with fright, he said in a very friendly voice:

"I'm waiting for Dolores. Your dresses here—you understand. I——"

"But you're a man."

Alexander stared blankly in reply.

"Dolores would never come here with a man," Rita shouted, "she promised me. Yes, she promised me. You're a liar. She has a girl friend, I know all about her. And you're a dirty liar." She still trembled as she spoke, the wrinkles round her mouth shifting and contracting. Smudges of lipstick appeared on her yellowish teeth.

"I apologise," he mumbled at last. "May I please go now?"

"How dare you! you, filthy depraved man!" Rita stepped forward, then quickly moved back towards the door. The light reflecting from the mirror blinded her for a moment. She made another step back and leant against the door, panting.

Then she tried to get something out of her handbag, but her trembling fingers let it drop. Small objects scattered around her feet.

Alexander saw a blue bottle of unusual shape. He picked it up in spite of her protests, and read *Corinth* imprinted under a trade mark. This discovery made her speechless, too. She grabbed the bottle from his hand and with a female genius for dramatic irrelevancy sprinkled her face with scent. She was still quivering all over her fragile body and this, oddly enough, sent the fragrance round her like radiant waves. Perhaps she felt protected that way.

"Who are you?" Rita was about to burst into tears and her conspicuous teeth chattered.

Alexander ignored the question, pushed her aside with a brutal gesture and opened the door. A smell of fried onion on the staircase mingled with the memory of her scent; the mixture of the two was to nauseate him all through the afternoon.

Alexander walked to Hampstead on foot, thinking fast. So this was the delayed post-mortem on the oddest outfit that had ever been assembled by three female maniacs, and he, a spy on a fool's holiday, had inherited the triangle, the muddle of mysteries, the nausea of stale scent, the lot! Again he recalled a parental piece of homely advice from the period of his apprenticeship: Arnin Senior had uttered it for Alexander's reflection in after years.

"My boy," he had said, "all humans live apart, so do not ignore those suspects who seem to exist a hundred spiritual kilometres apart from each other. Try to travel along those spiritual kilometres and you will discover in the end that your strangers have something in common; often very much indeed." The smoke from the pipe would always go up after such an oracular statement, closing the quotation with a ring.

If Kira had passed her digest of information via Rita to Dolores, and Dolores de Rouge-Ferrac had presented her husband with it on his birthday, he, Arnin Junior, was the greatest sentimental fool ever trapped by Cupid on a spy's holiday; moreover, if such things could happen, there was obviously no future in the profession, as old Shrimp had foretold in a whisky-trance.

Alexander had somehow skipped anger in his fast thinking; he did not want to stage a scene with Dolores in South-American style. He merely intended to tell her the truth, his truth about her. And he believed she would give

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him Kira's top copy, if she still had access to it. But one situation he wished to avoid at all costs: being with Dolores face to face during that trial of truth before the final curtain.

At home, he relaxed for an hour. With his legs on the table, as in American films, he drank brandy and read *The Times*. That venerable daily deserved the full treatment: brandy, legs on the table and disillusion in career and love. His reading, however, proved more rewarding than he expected.

Among the bits of social news he found a reference to a farewell party in honour of a Central American professor who had completed a tour of lectures on Rubén Dario's poetic diction. Another party was to be given for the British admirers of both Rubén Dario and the departing professor, and the host's name jumped to Alexander's eyes from the small print: El Conde de Rouge-Ferrac. Conveniently for him, this cultural reunion was going to take place in three hours' time, at nine-thirty.

He went to the shed where he kept his semi-professional utensils, shrugged his shoulders at the sight of Kira's inscription: "Beware of the spy", and from a pile of cards selected the cleanest six which also had golden lettering in the middle. From his library he took a one-volume edition of Rubén Dario's *Obras poéticas*; from his bedroom an old-fashioned dinner jacket—and pressed the trousers, which needed it badly.

Gate-crashing is a juvenile sport which inevitably affects one's taste and leads straight to the inhospitable habit of throwing bottle-parties with one's own bottle cleverly empty from the start. Alexander deplored what he did, but his gate-crashing was masterly in execution. He

behaved just like a timid expert or a very robust poet, shuffled his six invitation cards in front of the busiest of servants, and on being called Professor Doctor something, made safely for the door.

Dolores noticed him at once and turned pale. She was standing among four scholarly lovers of verse who were boring her with æsthetic appraisals, instead of praising the poetry written on her face. El Conde was entertaining a large group, and Alexander recognised him by his baldness, broken up by two tufts of curly hair just behind the ears.

Dolores excused herself, took a glass from a tray as she passed a waiter and gave it to Alexander.

"Professor," she said, "you wished to see Rubén Dario's autographs which my husband collects. You remember, of course, that exercise-book marked by Dario's teacher who was, if I am not mistaken, a Polish exile."

"Yes, you're perfectly right, Madame. His teacher was a Pole."

They went to a small library lit by only one lamp on the desk.

"What's wrong, Alexander?" she whispered, reaching for a leather-covered box on a shelf.

"I know all about you and Rita, and about your relationship with Terry. But what interests me far more is the use you made of me outside our love."

"It's generous of you to mention our love after all these accusations."

"I am offering you the truth about yourself, that's all."

"You're as crazy then, and as irresponsible as most of my friends," she answered, and handed him the box which

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he opened absent-mindedly. There were some manuscripts inside it.

"I want to hear your confirmation, Dolores."

"What would be the use of it? Confirmation, why this need of confirmation? You'll never be sure about me from now on."

As she spoke, Alexander thought of his past relationship with Kira, and of his present involvement with it. Would he ever be sure of the truth relevant to both himself and Kira?

"You may have to introduce me to your husband. What name will you give, Dolores?"

"Your real name, of course. I know it."

"Yes, I know you know it."

"Mine is de Rouge-Ferrac. But how stupid of me. You wouldn't have come here if you hadn't known it."

"No, I wouldn't, Dolores."

"And tonight you've broken the spell by seeing me at my home."

"But I met you here five months ago."

"That was different, Alexander. You were not in love with me then. And I picked you up, remember?"

"Why did you pick me up, Dolores?"

"Because I was convinced you would never spy on me."

"I spied on someone else, Dolores. You became involved at the very end. It is a pity."

"Your uncertainty is."

They both observed silence for a couple of minutes, looking at the manuscripts.

"Tell me, Dolores, what do you do at ten in the morning?"

"Every other day I write my letters at ten, for half an

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hour only. In the last few months I wrote mainly to you; different versions of love letters, you know: and I tore them all up. Cæsar's wife is not supposed to leave careless documents in her drawers, you know."

At that moment Cæsar walked in, and they were formally introduced. As Count de Rouge-Ferrac stretched out his hand, Alexander noticed how hairy it was round the wrist. This physical detail alone told him that from now on he would, after all, be admitting the usual partner to their bed of adultery.

The hairy hand stirred the dead hand to action. Next day Alexander received the second postcard with the drawing of a bull and a flower. The card came from Sicily, and this time it broke his isolation.

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Curtains

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ONE

Dolores did not break with him. They met as before at Ela's and even at Terry's place, or, sometimes, at the flatlet she had rented in his name. But they stopped talking of Ela, Edmundo and Terry, while Rita, for obvious reasons, became a new taboo. Alexander reciprocated by depositing Shrimp in the store-room of his little theatre.

The real Shrimp, however, Commander Pennyworth, R.N.V.R., was coming to life with remarkable signs of rejuvenation. He looked sixty and said he was, paid the overdue subscription at his club, boasted about his Nidag-Nug outfit every time he saw Alexander, and dropped the respectful 'sir' altogether.

After the first August week-end he grew restless and spoke of all those common people being able to afford holidays. And as Alexander pretended to be dense, the Commander asked him plainly whether for all the services rendered he could be sent on another trip to Sicily. The international spies—he had a hunch—were bound to invade Palermo from the two neighbouring mainlands, and it would be foolish to miss such a conglomeration of spicy clues.

Alexander now had less patience in reserve to deal with bores, maniacs and spongers. He gave Shrimp a clear warning.

"Listen, Commander," he said, "your board and lodging are paid for till the end of September. If you're so keen

to pop over to your sunny island, get yourself a job as a Continental guide in one of those tour-Europe-in-an-arm-chair outfits."

Pennyworth did not like the tone and the implication.

"What is the matter with you these days, old boy? Can't understand your attitude to me, Arnin. Haven't bungled anything yet, have I?"

"No, you haven't, Commander, but leave me in peace. Go to the club if you feel lonely."

"Seldom feel lonely, Arnin. Very seldom."

He shuffled his way out of the house with an advance of three pounds for future services, his eyes more shrimpish than ever.

The card with Kira's drawing posted in Palermo required a routine check-up, and Alexander telephoned Mrs. Thompson asking her to come round one evening. The nurse said she had few evenings free, because of charity work, and did not seem willing to discuss anything with him. She only mentioned that the osteopath's wife had behaved in a very unreasonable way about that letter, but everything had been settled nicely, out of court, and on Father Murphy's advice. In the end, when praised for her Christian tolerance, she agreed to call on Alexander after supper on Saturday.

Nurse Thompson came with the priest's name on her lips. He was apparently a wee bit tired that day, so she had to boil some rice for him and this delayed her, but otherwise Father Murphy seemed to flourish and, according to her, stopped being nervy. Slowly, by hints and pious glances, she made Alexander guess that she was allowing Father Murphy to undermine a wee bit her

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Presbyterian and Anglo-Catholic principles, and out of moral duty she was again his part-time house-keeper.

"He's very rough with his friends, Mr. Arnin," she said, holding herself primly on a soft chair, her thin legs close together, her hands clasped. "Do you know what he actually said to me, Father Murphy I mean?"

"What did he say, Mrs. Thompson?"

"Father Murphy said I was likely to become a gossiping type if I didn't watch out. Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Arnin, he got very upset, poor dear, about those two letters I wrote to Mr. and Mrs. Ragandbone. Very nice of him, too. And he said I would be able to curb myself a wee bit better if I went to proper confessions. Well, you know, Father Murphy has his religion to think of, and he means no harm."

"I admire Father Murphy," said Alexander.

"I knew you would, Mr. Arnin. You both are on the quiet side, if you don't mind the personal remark, Mr. Arnin."

"Not at all. And—Mrs. Thompson, does this drawing remind you of anything?" He showed her the postcard. The nurse's eyes shifted. She drew her knees a little apart, then quickly closed them together and sighed from the depth of her vocational sympathy.

"Poor Mrs. Arnin, she drew these funny pictures when she was most in pain. And this one has the bull. Yes, she explained to me during our stay in Sicily why she liked putting the bull on her pictures. We were, you might say, spiritually close to each other during that holiday, because she was so lonely there, poor dear. Only the kind sun in the sky and her nurse."

"What was Kira's explanation about the bull, Mrs. Thompson?"

"Oh, it didn't seem much of an explanation to me, Mr. Arnin. Just a proverb. Mrs. Arnin read it, I think, in one of her guide-books. She had the bottom of her case laid out with all those books on Sicily; in English and German they were, and in Italian."

"Do you remember the proverb?"

"Oh yes, rather. It's not very long, Mr. Arnin."

"But what is the proverb, Mrs. Thompson?"

She straightened herself up in the chair and recited, as if she were quoting the first line of a hymn:

"'Beware of the bull sniffing at a flower.' That's all, Mr. Arnin. I suppose it means that all manner of bull is dangerous."

"Or, Mrs. Thompson," he promptly broke in, "it may mean that the bull which likes sniffing flowers is particularly dangerous."

"You may be right, Mr. Arnin. And I'll ask Father Murphy whether the proverb comes from one of those ancient Catholic Fathers."

"The odd thing about the drawing, Mrs. Thompson, is that it arrived from Palermo only a few days ago."

"Oh, did it, really? That Italian post must be worse than the Russian."

"No, Mrs. Thompson. My wife's card was posted on the twelfth of August this year. You can see the date clearly on the back, just above the address, Mrs. Thompson."

"Fancy that! A queer sort of mistake. I hope it wasn't a shock to you, Mr. Arnin."

"No, it wasn't. I think I know the explanation."

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The nurse looked at her watch anxiously, and said she had to be by her telephone at eleven. She expected a few night calls.

Alexander made another thorough search of Kira's rooms, but found nothing extraordinary except for a flimsy set of black underwear. So she had departed for once from her addiction to virginal white. Alexander concluded that the black set must have been bought either for or by Miss Scarlet Sin—Rita.

* * * * *

Alexander woke up with a clear desire: he wanted to touch Dolores, to hear her voice, to watch the movements of her eyelashes. At eleven he gave Dolores the usual telephone message, and in half an hour he did see her and did touch her hands.

Intuition did not fail her either; Dolores sensed tenderness and trust extended to her like arms and she allowed Alexander to caress her with words and gazes. A glass of Marsala embraced by her fingers looked like a ceremonial object of love, and Dolores kissed it slowly each time she drank from it. Was it an intuitive guess then that she came like a goddess of oblivion accepting his love in its isolated form, with no memories encroaching on the uniqueness of the moment?

Only at the end of the afternoon, when she had to fetch Xavier, Dolores said quietly, laying her hand on his arm:

"No matter what we think of each other now, no matter what happens to us, I shall always be grateful to you for helping my love to express every passion it had. There are limiting loves and love-affairs, I know that. And it's

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wrong, profoundly wrong, to accept limitation as a sophisticated kink. I was brought up by very progressive parents, and no one, believe me, can be more self-conscious than an anti-clerical South American progressive. Oh yes, I was taught to be tolerant about every human aberration, and regarded perverts as exceptionally intelligent just because they were perverts. In the end I became the type I now abhor—a progressive prig. You know, I would have grown into a monster of loveless desires, limiting myself and others, crippling every sincere astonishment with this progressive knowingness which is the cancer of our society. Since advanced cancer can't be cured yet, perhaps the one inside me you removed, Alexander, will grow again when we are no longer lovers."

Alexander was ready to betray the spy's utmost isolation, the isolation of his sceptical mind: he longed to assure Dolores that their love would survive the disease he had grafted on her living love from Kira's dead self-hatred. But he said nothing, and returned home a coward.

TWO

Later, when he reflected on Dolores's words and understood how much, in fact, they had said, he held them in his memory as her declaration of love, and knew that he should give his in return. Their isolation then could be sealed off again and their mutual trust mended. If only he could have more ruthlessness in him this time to keep strangers out, to be destructive at the first sign of their

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interference. He would never again admit other people's obsessions to their love.

On a dry warm morning in the middle of September he waited for Dolores outside the cafeteria in the park. He wore his extravagant Mexican suit, more summery than anything in the sky or on the leaves. Birds hopped in the grass before him and seemed to turn their beaks to see his exotic plumage. The greenish jacket shot with purple threads had two slits at the back and the flap between them wagged like a flat tail. A flower in his buttonhole and shoes with ornamented caps completed his display of individual fashion. He saw her car drive into the park, and went towards it.

It was only half-past ten, the earliest morning date they had ever had, and a few cars parked between the cafeteria and the gate seemed asleep, their noses stuck into the shade from the trees. But as soon as Dolores halted and he snatched her hand through the window to kiss it, all the cars broke off their slumber, and heads, curious, indignant and amused, popped out of them. He was certainly a sight, overlaid with beautifying effects, just like the other sight near-by, with Prince Albert monumentally embarrassed.

"Good gracious," Dolores exclaimed, "where are you hiding your parrot?"

"I love you so much this morning, Dolores. Look around, all these people are staring at you from the cars. Your beauty amazes them."

"And your suit, too. I think I shall get used to it when we walk in the sun."

"I put it on especially for you, Dolores. You see, all those characters there think I am a gigolo, very fussy and

very ambitious, and you are the peak of my ambition."

"Oh, I hope they do think that," she exclaimed in her bright party manner, and then, pouting her large mouth, added: "Perhaps they imagine I am one of those motorised prostitutes, off duty, with her Brazilian agent. You're exploiting me, of course, but I can't stop loving you. Kiss me now, Alexander, in front of all those frustrated males."

He kissed her and she said:

"It tastes so fresh at a quarter to eleven."

"You have a new lipstick, Dolores."

"Yes, it's a present."

"Would you like me to give you a present? I have never given you anything."

"If you want to act your gigolo part, you must expect presents from me. As a matter of fact, I've got one on me."

"Tell me first what it is. I may not approve of it, Dolores. Gigolos are hard to please."

"It's very precious, you know. Two of my eyelashes which dropped into my handkerchief when I cried because of you." She smiled, but her lips quivered as if she were about to confirm her words with new tears. "I put them into this," she said, and handed him an old medallion.

Alexander opened it and saw the two eyelashes behind glass. He did not know what to do.

"It's gold," he muttered, trying to make it his excuse.

"My Indian ancestors had too much of it, and they lost it. This isn't a medallion really, it's part of a large Aztec brooch, but a jeweller turned it into a more European thing. Take it, my gigolo."

Alexander let it drop into his pocket, and forgot to thank her. He could not help comparing the gift of eye-

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lashes with the bit of Kira's tooth enclosed in the letter he had burnt. Women treated their bodies with respect and thought them worthy of shedding little relics for those who had shown them the same respect. And the Polish dentist was right: women had the knack of improvising fetishes.

A thought and a recollection clashing within his mood could suddenly alter his behaviour towards Dolores. He had come to declare his love in the park, ridiculously dressed up to remind Dolores of their obstinate probing into obsessions at Rita's place; and he had succeeded with his gigolo act. Dolores was ready to follow up the trail which they had discovered earlier. But the intrusion of Kira caused by his thoughts about the fetish he had received from Dolores spoilt the continuity of his mood.

He lost his gigolo manner, the fantastic suit draping him pointlessly in the sun; and as the morning went on, they both felt the feebleness of their pretence. The only thing they could do to restore their self-respect was to re-experience the sincerity of the act.

For the first time Alexander made love to her as if she were Kira, and this curious juxtaposition led him to the sudden awareness that he was no longer in the least involved with Kira. It also confirmed, by way of that negation, the extent to which Dolores had penetrated into all his obsessions, and he knew that by loving her he would ultimately lose all capacity for future love. Already he could not imagine ever feeling a strong desire for another woman, and this struck him as unfair to the abstract ideal of virility.

His next attempt, therefore, would have to be seducing a stranger, a very ordinary stranger, in order to re-learn

the clumsy rudiments of sex, away from love's intuition. He chose for that purpose a hearty girl with pink cheeks and firm breasts who cornered him at a basement party in Chelsea and insisted on getting drunk. Alexander dissuaded her from mixing cider with Portuguese red wine, told her one silly joke and two long-winded compliments; but when the girl asked to be escorted home, he took her to his house in Hampstead.

The girl's name was Monica, and Alexander said he had never really known a girl of that name before, which was perfectly true, and she understood it as a special hint. With a disarming eagerness she undressed while he was brewing coffee in the kitchen, and, on his return, greeted him with a naked advertisement of physical fitness. With her legs bent, Monica did a slimming exercise, then a few rapid movements to make her blood circulate better, after which she started worrying about the colour of her knees.

She also drank a little coffee, admired the furniture and the wallpaper, and then asked Alexander whether she could possibly take a shower beforehand. He nodded, and she sprang across the room to the bath in a sportive manner. The noise of splashed water and the night chill set Alexander into an autumnal mood, but he waited patiently.

The girl returned, cleaner and pinker, drank the rest of her coffee and tried the sofa.

"It's too soft," she said, rubbing her knees, which looked sadly discoloured.

"Do you want a harder——" He did not know which piece of furniture would appeal to her sportive nature.

"A harder what?" she asked.

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"Mattress, I suppose."

"Let's do it on something really hard, like the floor."

"We might," Alexander mumbled.

"Aren't you going to do some exercises first? It's good for hygienic copulation. There's a book all about Swedish gymnastics and modern sex."

"By a Swede?" he said, and took his tie off.

"I honestly don't know." Monica looked worried.

"It doesn't matter. And I think I'll skip the exercises tonight. May I, Monica?"

"If you wish. You're the host." She smiled and rubbed her left knees where the blood seemed to flow under a purple patch. Alexander bent over her and noticed the colour of her eyes. They were unexpectedly brown.

"You like it sideways, I'm sure you do." Her knowingness was progressive all right. She tried to kiss him by craning her neck out, but missed first his mouth and then his chin.

"Well, it's all for love," Alexander muttered, and for ten minutes pitied himself more than the girl. Monica was a cheerful prig to the end. She did more exercises later, ate a sandwich and slept in Kira's bed. The total costs amounted to a double taxi-fare from Hampstead to the Fulham Road, a truly economical modern romance.

Alexander did not feel he had been unfaithful to Dolores or to his own idea of their love. The girl he had picked up served his purpose and he had performed an easy exercise with her which left him with a sense of hygienic boredom. He could no longer isolate sex from love; he could no longer hurt Dolores by using another woman's body. Yes, Dolores was right when she said it would be impossible for him to offend her. Perhaps he

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could not betray her, either. Was her love wholly immune from the poison of lower emotions?

THREE

On his landlady's typewriter Commander Pennyworth composed a memorandum to Alexander Arnin, who had paid his board and lodging to the end of September, but kept at a stingy distance from him all through October and November.

The landlady had the heart of a spiritualist medium: she sensed that the Commander's source of income had passed away into the great unknown, and she knew it was never any use communicating with departed money. The Commander tried his old-world charm on her, but neither club talk nor snobbish complaints about his impoverished cousins in the House of Lords made a lasting impression on her. As for the unfortunate attempt to enlist the help of a twin set of poltergeists in the parlour, it only alienated the woman further and left a permanent scar on the clay bust of the Bard.

In the middle of this war of nerves the Commander spotted a German camera on a stool in a milk-bar, appropriated the find as a compensation for his war-time fire-watching in Cheltenham, and promptly thought up a little photographic outfit which might repair his financial losses. Then he worked it out in detail.

When Alexander received Shrimp's memorandum in a large envelope with a discreet warning that its contents

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were 'confidential and personal', he at first took it to be yet another of Kira's posthumous sketches. He recognised the amateurish typing and the style.

But the photographic prints, though badly finished, made him sit up with angry interest. One showed him in his Mexican suit on a walk with Dolores, and the trees about them could just fake the interior of a Brazilian forest. In the second print the camera concentrated less on the background and more on Dolores, who held Alexander in her arms near a pond with two ducks. The remaining enclosures showed a practical taste for architecture. Shrimp had photographed the grated entrance to the flatlets with a number cleverly visible, then the porch of the splendid block where Ela lived with its name added in red ink.

He had even kindled some sympathy for the architecture of London Tube stations, and his vision of Kilburn was taken from a surrealist angle, yet he had not got as far as Terry's place.

To the most photogenic snapshot of Dolores he had attached the address of Señor de Rouge-Ferrac with his full credentials neatly jotted down; to the record of Alexander's walk in Kensington Gardens he had added a price list, every number clearly shaped. The prints were relatively cheap: two guineas each, a ten shilling reduction after the first dozen, but Shrimp drove a hard bargain when it came to the sale of the film rolls. He would not part with them at any fixed sum; in keeping with the agent's style he preferred a percentage.

He wanted a steady flow of cash: eleven per cent out of Alexander's profitable trips to the warm countries which he, Commander Pennyworth, was willing to visit in

any disguise his employer cared to envisage for him. An advance of a thousand pounds might perhaps improve their relations recently so much estranged. The eleven per cent showed a curious numerical habit, for Indian mystics, too, toured the world with their messages every eleventh year.

A moribund lifeman still kicking in him, the Commander wanted to be one up on every common agent who thought in small round figures. He had under-estimated, however, the furious efficiency of a double-crossed agent, especially when the agent happened to be secret, well-to-do, and in love.

Alexander hid the photographs in his safe, opened the latest of his files and looked up Shrimp's irregular credentials. Oddly enough, he had trusted the old phoney when he had sent him to Sicily, but in order to keep his records up to date, he had allotted five blank cards to Shrimp's career, past and future. Such simple precautions seemed to him necessary in the case of a temporary employee, and all his employees so far had been dramatically temporary.

He had only filled up one card for his part-time inventor of outfits, but it was quite enough. In sixty odd abbreviations the whole history of Shrimp's bungling was comprised. His line of progress went down by double-backward leaps, just like the busy *Gunga Din* in the Pennyworth version.

Most incidents were petty and dulled by repetition. But the first, which the fake Commander had tried hard to obliterate, concerned a certain Jimmy, a carelessly brave Scottish lad who had got himself shot at the very end of World War One, but his great pal, Pennyworth,ing,

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had impersonated him back to life, preserving his name, rank and all, for which attempt he received a Victoria Cross.

The fraud was discovered when Shrimp carried the thing a bit too far by writing up the story of his exploits for a Sunday paper. People get very touchy and vindictive when false prophets or false heroes start pulling funny faces at them. The Commander's rank and the liaison outfit between the British Navy and all the armies of the Empire had to lie in Shrimp's head for some twenty years, until it was sufficiently ripe to become half credible.

Alexander decided the time had come to remind the Commander of Jimmy and the Victoria Cross. Into a registered envelope he put an old newspaper cutting with a faint photograph of Shrimp's best friend and added a brief note, using the capital letters to which old Shrimp was so partial:

GIVE ME BACK MY CROSS OR JOIN ME IN
MY GRAVE. YOUR PAL JIMMY.

Alexander appreciated Shrimp's price list, and to keep their correspondence in balance he enclosed two relevant estimates which he had obtained locally, one from a jeweller and the other from an undertaker. The first estimate gave the price of a Victoria Cross minus courage, and the second the costs of a decent funeral for a tallish Commander, R.N.V.R., uniform and ribbons supplied by the firm.

After sending his letter to Shrimp, he wrapped up a number plate in a newspaper and went to meet Dolores. The number plate was unusual and the hour of their

meeting late. He had asked her to spend the whole night with him, and the choice of place was to be his for once.

He had chosen the area, but not the particular spot, which he entrusted to chance. Dolores brought a small leather case with her, and when they parked the car in a dim street off Marylebone Road, he attached his fake plate to the back and proceeded to cover her case with hotel labels. The labels were Turkish, and so was the number plate.

"What sort of moustache do you think would suit me—twirled up, bushy or drooping? I've got all three in my pocket."

Dolores laughed and made a drooping sign with her fingers. She wore a thick fur coat, its collar covering her face up to the tips of her ears, and she looked twice her size.

"Am I supposed to be terribly *incognito*, Alexander? I mean, is this high collar mysterious enough? Where are you taking me? To London Airport?"

"No, we're going to the country. A Turkish banker on a cold holiday in England, very smart and very intimate."

"Am I his Turkish wife?"

"No, Dolores, you're the woman he ran away with. He also ran away with some funds, which makes the late holiday understandable."

"Put the moustache on. I love Turkey."

"I'll do it when we find a hotel."

"Oh—we haven't booked a room yet?"

"No. Dolores, one arrives *incognito* only late at night, when everybody is asleep."

He often did that in strange places: arrived late and paid the hotel bill during the afternoon siesta when the

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whole town was sticky with sweat and sleep. And his registration entries, when they bothered to ask for them, had the scribbled authority of medical prescriptions: they could only be deciphered by experts, who in his case were police agents, illiterate, or just bribable.

"I hope you won't put my name down in the hotel book by mistake. If one knows something, one can make a mistake; it's better not to know. And poor Cæsar's wife . . ."

Alexander smiled, thinking of her wilful mistake with his name at the flatlets. They drove through the suburbs under strong yellow lights which gave their faces a cunning pallor. It was eight o'clock.

They ate dinner at a mock-Tudor inn by the cross-roads and an hour later found a hotel huddled in a grove, the bare oaks shaking their arms over its chimneys. It was the sort of place where one could hatch a couple of revolutions just by sitting in a deep arm-chair near the asthmatic fire.

They were given a room so big that the two beds in it seemed frightened by the ceiling, the walls and the gloomy wardrobe with several suicidal hangers dangling inside it. The recess with a bath was frivolously pink. They both thought of Rita, but did not dare to disturb the taboo.

And they repeated the trial of their April night, extending the limits of passion up to the wide-awake moment of its total absence. But this time he did not probe into a secret hidden under the evasive layers of pornography.

Alexander knew now how sexless, in fact, all pornographic fantasies were, cheating the instinct in the body through the artificial screens of thought, which absorbed the images before they were ready to enrich other sensations. For what was sexless in these ever-dissolving images, originated from the emptiness of thought taken as a sub-

stitute for the concrete things it simulated and distorted.

The November dawn came late, but they felt it on their skin like the sun which was absent from the sky: the dawn radiated the mystery of absence, all absence, whether in nature or in the human mind. They could not describe it, yet they believed in its paradoxical reality.

Love alone restores meaning to absence, because it holds on to a simple conviction that the absence of an object, of a human being or of God is never utterly empty with the emptiness of despair.

Alexander knew he was approaching an act of faith, and the nearness of it expressed itself through that acute sensation of absence. Sin had no meaning for him, although he loved Dolores for her triumph over despair. Perhaps he sinned against Kira for thinking that her despair had rejected all love, including its mockery: self-hatred.

When they drove back to London, Alexander remembered Shrimp and suddenly wanted to end their theatrical interval by mentioning him.

"You know, Dolores," he said, "Commander Shrimp is taking a long unpaid leave. He won't be seen anywhere. I am afraid it looks like the end of the greatest secret agent of our times."

"Oh!" Dolores moved her eyelashes quickly. She was taken by surprise.

"Could you drop me somewhere near Notting Hill Gate? I think I should call on old Shrimp and bid him good-bye unless it's already too late."

"I hope not," she said as the car halted at the traffic lights in High Street, Kensington.

It was very conveniently too late. Commander Pennyworth had died of a heart attack while reading his

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morning mail, just after eight o'clock. The landlady was much relieved when she saw Alexander. And soon her worry passed away into the great unknown, when he offered to pay Pennyworth's debts and move the body to an undertaker's chapel.

"There's a small matter of family papers and photographs," he said. "Shall I take them at once to free the room for a new lodger?"

"It's very kind of you, sir, and most considerate, too. Thank you ever so much, sir."

Alexander sold the German camera in Portobello Road, which paid for smaller expenses. On the financial score at least Shrimp was one up: the price of the photographs had soared high to meet the costs of cremation, which proved to be a dignified affair, the music of Haydn mingling with the ashes. Privately and without any accompaniment, Alexander cremated Shrimp's final outfit, but he retained the idyllic photograph with Dolores, himself and the two ducks afloat. After all, it is flattering to see oneself embraced by a woman of exceptional beauty, with only ducks as disinterested witnesses.

A curtain of fire had fallen over the memory of Shrimp the puppet spy. And Alexander learnt a moral from his own ignoble counter-action against the ignoble threat of an amateur blackmailer. Even such callous heels as Pennyworth have a vulnerable spot somewhere in their character, and it is usually their sense of honour, however shaky it may appear to be every day of their life.

They die of it, as a rule.

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FOUR

For some weeks now *The Times* had respected Alexander's isolation and occasionally printed small bits of confidential news, it seemed, for his exclusive use. After the New Year he read in the paper that the unsuspecting Cæsar had just returned from *la capital*, and was soon to be a genuine His Excellency, in Stockholm, of all unexpected places.

With regard to Count de Rouge-Ferrac, Alexander's feelings never wavered: he regularly smeared the man's diplomatic pomposity in his dreams, but atoned for this subconscious jealousy by day, thinking well of him, especially during meal-times, when a domestic halo glowed over that proud bald patch, and its owner invariably became a jolly decent husband and father.

Alexander wished he could congratulate the Count on achieving his life's ambition, but he reminded himself that there was a zone of gentlemanly neutrality between them, more sensible than the triangular bridges most men were so stupidly anxious to build over illicit love. But could he honestly take the credit for this state of affairs? It was Dolores who had imposed the rule of honourable silence on their situation.

He himself might easily have gone out of his way to humiliate her husband with a cad's friendship, as he, in fact, had done on several occasions when his job made such cheap means excusable for the time being.

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Alexander wondered whether Dolores would tell him about her husband's new post, or at least hint at it. She could, of course, perform a vanishing trick and spare herself the trouble of dramatic explanations. Whichever method she would choose in the end, he had to prepare himself for a sudden twist in their relationship. But how could he be prepared, what was there to prepare? The possibility of parting with Dolores acted on him like an injection before an operation; it numbed his nerves, and the pulse merely marked time—it did not seem to belong to his heart.

Again and again a theatrical simile asserted itself in his mind: this waiting was like an actor's numb expectation before the fall of the curtain—around him the props and in front the gaping hollow of the auditorium; only a few words more and the blind would go down, cutting off the illusion with a sharp swish.

A different curtain, however, dropped first, and off stage, jerking Alexander out of his stupor. It was Kira's curtain which had hung over his head all those months since her death in March. It only needed a hard pull; anybody might have brought it down, but the hand that did it for Alexander was Mrs. Thompson's.

She rang his door-bell early one day at the end of January. He thought it was the postman and went to the door with the cord of his dressing-gown undone and his hair dishevelled. The nurse embarrassed him by looking aside, but after mumbled apologies he learnt to his surprise that she had come with a letter. Quickly he made coffee to wake himself up, and Nurse Thompson had a few sips, too, which restored her usual self-confidence.

She began with Rome, although for her all the roads

seemed to lead out of Rome. Her thoughts travelled back there only to take a homeward path. Alexander gathered that the awaited conversion had descended upon her from the heights and she could not quite get used to it. Rome said this and Father Murphy said that, but Rome might also say something else, to which Father Murphy would no doubt supply a wise comment.

The weedy priest had grown into a granite obelisk at which Mrs. Thompson's words hammered with the noise of praise. She knew for certain that the priest was a budding saint, for only a saint could have converted her dour soul.

"But God doesn't want him to starve himself for religion," she exploded. "I must knock that nonsense out of him. He's still a wee bit nervy, Mr. Arnin, but what a rock of faith!"

At last she took one of the roads from Rome, which led directly to the purpose of her visit.

"Father Murphy wouldn't let me send the letter from the Vatican, with one of those lovely stamps His Holiness the Pope has printed there. He was rather rough with me, Mr. Arnin, and said I was a wicked woman, which I must say upset me a wee bit. To be wicked two days after the conversion, that's not my sort of behaviour, I assure you. But I think he really got himself worked up about my sending those letters from Italy. I hope you won't get yourself worked up, too, because I honestly did just what Mrs. Arnin made me swear to do—poor dear. I have come straight from Holy Communion, Mr. Arnin—that's why I rushed here—so you must believe every word I say, Mr. Arnin. And—well—that Sicilian sailor didn't call on me last Friday, so I thought Father Murphy might perhaps

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use his influence in Rome and get the letter sent from the Vatican City."

It was impossible to interrupt her; she rattled off her extra confession at a tremendously pious rate, her thin legs ready to genuflect at the sound of the door-bell or the telephone.

"Am I to understand, Mrs. Thompson, that those two cards from Sicily and the registered letter were in fact sent by you?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes, Mr. Arnin, though it was that Sicilian sailor who stuck the stamps on and did the actual posting in Palermo. You see, I had met him when he was still a servant to one of my patients in Highgate."

"Did my wife know him?"

"Good heavens, no, Mr. Arnin. She knew no one in Sicily, poor dear, that's why she got those peculiar ideas. And she drew and drew, lovely pictures, nasty pictures, bulls, lizards and other unpleasant things. And she talked of dying, and of living for a year after her death, provided I did what she wanted me to do. I honestly couldn't refuse her, Mr. Arnin. I just couldn't. What harm is there, Mr. Arnin, in posting a couple of letters addressed to the person who has written them? None, I tell you, Mr. Arnin. And besides, the poor dear used to send funny postcards to herself when she felt out of sorts in London. It's not so peculiar, really. I know two other lady patients who do that regularly every month when they get depressed."

"How many such letters did my wife give you to post after her suicide?"

"She never mentioned suicide then, Mr. Arnin. I wouldn't have listened to an immoral thing like that."

"How many letters did she give you, Mrs. Thompson?" he repeated angrily, and the change of tone frightened the nurse. Her eloquence was curbed.

"Just those two cards with the bull, Mr. Arnin, and two letters, both registered."

"Only one registered letter arrived here, and a long time ago, Mrs. Thompson." His voice still sounded angry.

"Everything is all right, Mr. Arnin. The second letter she wanted to be posted just before the anniversary."

"What anniversary? Please try to express yourself more clearly, Mrs. Thompson."

"Well, I wouldn't like to cause you any pain, Mr. Arnin. It's the anniversary of her death Mrs. Arnin meant. Mind you, she never mentioned suicide, never, I can swear to that."

"You needn't, Mrs. Thompson. Just tell the truth."

"Oh, Mr. Arnin, with all due respect . . ."

"Please go on. I want to know the facts. Where is the letter?"

"You mean the one Father Murphy wouldn't let me send through the Vatican?"

"You said yourself there was only one letter to be posted before the anniversary."

"That's right. In three weeks' time, Mr. Arnin. But when Father Murphy heard of it he was so angry, and he told me to bring the letter to you directly. I must apologise to you, Mr. Arnin, and Father Murphy said I ought to. Well—here I am and here's the letter."

She opened her shopping-bag, peeped into it, took out a rosary with fluffs of cotton-wool stuck to it, put the rosary back and produced the letter from under some tissue

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paper. Alexander glanced at the envelope: it was addressed to Miss Kira Pinski and had a red blob of sealing-wax at the back.

"I hope you'll forgive me, too, Mr. Arnin. I've already got absolution; that's from God, you see."

"Oh, come off it, Mrs. Thompson, I haven't been converted. But you may tell Father Murphy that I respect his judgment. I'll call on him soon."

Alone in his study, he cut the envelope and took out its bulky content. There were nine sheets altogether, covered with Kira's handwriting, and each 't' on them beckoned with its extended arm to a symbolic hangman, while the rest of the alphabet hopped about in a macabre polka. A typed page slid from under a rusty clip as if it had been meant to fall like this into Alexander's hand. It was the top copy of Kira's clever digest. She had flogged her spying joke to the very end.

Alexander looked at the manuscript which seemed to be a digest of a diary, well pruned with dates reduced to the days of the week. It began on a Sunday with an affectionate address to its author.

* * * * *

Sunday

My Dearest Kira,

If all goes well and silly Mrs. Thompson treats the mattress with respect, I shall get you out of this room and out of this world on Friday, at five o'clock in the afternoon precisely. Should, however, the silly gossip find my winter granary under the mattress, our plan would have to be shelved for good. Without pills I just could not do it,

Kira; you know I am too cowardly to see my own blood run and we haven't got a puff of gas in the whole house. Anyway, I hate inhaling, and I don't know enough about currents and fuses to electrocute myself.

But I promise you, my Darling, I shall try my best on Friday. His Sancta Simplicitas Father Murphy and my enigmatic Husband (his domestic rank deserves a capital letter, don't you agree?) both of them think me rather intelligent, and I must be, because I found out about Ali's spying trips on the eve of our marriage, long before discovering his bric-à-brac in the shed.

Now listen, Kira, I am not against you, I never have been. Why do you always nag me that I should love you more? Must I give love, love, love, nothing but love, all the time? And to everybody? Yes, you are everybody, I know—you have told me that thousands, millions of times.

You are the cat by the butcher's shop, because I like stroking it; you are the boy on a red scooter because I would like to stroke his neck; you are the water I love splashing in the bath; you are the leaves too, soft and scented, because I chew them absent-mindedly like a cow while walking in the park.

Of course, I cannot go for my walks now, but nor can you, pretentious, sick, possessive bitch I keep calling my Darling for the sake of our peaceful correspondence. If I failed to kill you, you might take those strolls alone and boast that it was your zest for life that did it. You are such a selfish prig and adolescent boaster.

Oh, go to hell and stay there, I really mean hell. Because you have made my life a private hell, always at my ear, nagging, telling lies, begging for love, dreaming my best

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dreams, snoring like a pig. We shall part company on Friday, darling Kira; only five little days for the pig to snore, to wallow in the mire.

Monday

Suicide after one failed attempt requires the devil's courage, though His Sancta Simplicitas Father Murphy says the devil has hellish pluck but not much courage. When I managed to pour a bottleful of horrid mixture into Kira's throat, the darling vitalist belched the stuff out in the ambulance, then got herself pumped by a handsome doctor in hospital and returned home so pathetically misunderstood, so ethereal, so metaphysically bitchy. And His Sancta Simplicitas started pouring his own holy mixture into Kira's eternal soul.

It was nasty, let us admit, my Darling Failure, it was very nasty to breathe life again on such a rude awaking. There ought to be a law proposed, preferably by a humanitarian German, that suicide once attempted should not be interrupted by a rude pump, a handsome doctor or a guardian angel's prayer, the last item by kind permission of Father Murphy, S.S.

Why did I put down this pathologically obvious abbreviation, S.S.? Because you interfered again, Kira, and your self-consoling lie got uncovered. You loved Mother in such a blind possessive way that you invented that romantic story about her dying in childbirth, just to please your frightened imagination. The other death was very hard to imagine, and you could not afford to strain your tender nerves.

May I, my sensitive Darling, remind you that Mother choked to death in the most hygienic chamber devised by

a German humanitarian, and what is gas, after all?—a practical every-day commodity. And it numbs pain, too, when one has a rotten tooth pulled out. The Teutonic experts would say Mummy did not feel much pain, only she got a bit squashed when the others in the chamber started to push from all sides. People behave just like a herd of animals, my dear, when they smell death together.

So now you know why we prefer electricity in this comfortable house of ours: no gas, not one puff. And you will not choke in your death-birth, Kira my sensitive little bitch.

Why did I write "the others in the chamber", and not very simply—Jews? Because you would not have it so explicitly said, my precious cosmopolitan, oh, no! You must have inherited that vagueness from sweet ever-so-friendly Papa.

You remember, he was a Pole in Warsaw, a Czechoslovak in Prague, and an Austro-Hungarian in Vienna; and he thought all these triple compatriots of his adored him for being such a universal friend. He had a weak spot for German *Kultur*, though—Schiller, Schopenhauer, Ranke *und so weiter*; but he died too soon, just when one of the lovers of Schiller was about to perfect the automatic door in his model of a gas chamber. But Mother inhaled a concentrated dose of Schiller, Ranke and the whole lot of them, for Papa and for herself. Mother was so careless about money; she gave all her dollars away in bribes to send little Kira abroad.

How can you wait, wait and wait for death, how can you do nothing about it, you cosmopolitan charmer, you sparkling soul of every Golders Green *soirée*? You are a Viennese in Swiss Cottage, a Russian Kira in Child's Hill, a

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Warsaw flirt in South Kensington, a mysterious European in bed with Ali and in mystical wedlock with Father Murphy; you are even a quarter Hungarian at that dreadful paprika place in Finchley Road.

But, in point of fact, my Darling illusionist, you are just a lucky Jewess who did not choke to death, but instead married a prosperous spy who is truly cosmopolitan in his indifference to nations, religions and to you, *meine kleine Jüdin*. Now, why did you not bother in your lazy comfort to teach me some Hebrew so that I might pray for those dead millions of 'others' in the language of their cruel unsentimental prophets; why did you not pray for me during my guilty sleep so that I could wake up one morning with faith in my weeping eyes?

You were lazy, Kira, in a wistful cosmopolitan manner; just as those living 'others' are lazy all over their adopted London, Paris, New York or what have you: you sat as they sit in a shining tin of success on wheels, wearing a featureless mask of oblivion. You want the whole world to love you for your racial origin which you are at pains to hide under a phoney sophistication, and you arch your back like a frightened cat as soon as they acknowledge your Jewish identity. How vulgar to mention Jews in front of a cosmopolitan Jew.

Oh, Kira, Kira, you lazy intellectual bitch. Of course, you wanted to exterminate all the Germans after the war, as if by exterminating them you could erase the horror from human memory, the horror which will haunt dreamers for generations to come and rear its shrunken head on many a couch in psychoanalysts' chambers. You clapped heroically for the dead in Israel, and conscientiously slipped Ali's dirty coins into every collection box

you saw when the State of Israel was choking in its childbirth.

But when I once told you to go there and see that birth from death, you said I was deep down an anti-Semitic Kira, very vulgar and so unimaginative. Besides, even Mrs. Antique was disappointed with them out there: far too many uniforms, she said, and such noisy nationalists on top of it, not to mention those dreadful newcomers from the desert.

"When I visited Tel Aviv in 1930," Mrs. Antique cackled, "it was just like dear old Vienna. I felt quite at home there. But now, my dear Kira, you can't even understand what they're saying in Tel Aviv. They're no longer Europeans, I am afraid. *Die echten Juden*, I tell you, come to my shop in Golders Green, so why go there and waste English pounds?"

Kira, do you hear me?—you will die a nondescript phoney on Friday at five in the afternoon.

Tuesday

Let us talk of him, the Husband, my Darling Kira, your hubby more than mine. I would not have married him, you know, if you had not bullied me into love—love, love, infernal round-the-clock love, with copulation thrown in and performed like a symphony by Brahms, every instrument given a solid piece of work to do.

I would rather have lived 'in sin' with Ali than allow love to deteriorate into a sinful marriage. However, I am not supposed to believe in sin, because my Husband married me sinless and tediously virginal. You are the sexy one in our dual set-up, Darling Kira, but not all that sexy, you know. You get excited by just going to bed;

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children feel the same after they have sat on their chamber-pot.

I think I am just a Mrs. Slot-Machine, with one tinny tune inside. It sounds all right when you drop the coin for the first time, later the tune becomes too familiar; I should not be used more than once, really. And that is, I am afraid, what the wisest of them do to me.

Is Ali-Baba, the Generous Spy, very foolish or very wise, when it comes to sorting out the two of us, his twin wives? He has got himself a little modern harem all right; and while Mrs. Slot-Machine plays her only tune faithfully, Kira the would-be nymphomaniac jumps into bed with fake enthusiasm.

Ali-Baba, however, has a perfectionist's mania to cope with, and his forty secrets that rob him of normal human weaknesses will follow him from land to land, until he gets shot by another maniac of perfection.

I knew at once, Darling Kira, why you had that silly urge to imitate his idiotic perfectionism. Like all half-immoral half-timid bitches, you wanted to get a kick out of aping your husband while the loving was still good. Then you became anxious that he might see through your clever tricks, and you thought up that Top Secret with a Copy, making your own brilliant compilation out of bits and pieces, so that the Las Monjas project could be inflated through your indiscretion.

Your aping will soon be over, Kira, but poor Ali with his band of forty secrets will have to do a little chase round and round in circles, just like a dog trying to catch a fly on its tail. He is bound to get your motives all wrong, because you will by then be deep in your grave, and death—I agree for once with sweet Father Murphy—twists

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everything into a meaningless heap, if you deny a religious sense to it.

Since Ali, like you and me, is a down-to-earth humanist, he will dehumanise us both in no time with his perfectionist's analytical brain. Perhaps I have dehumanised him also, with my loveless understanding and with your erotic fantasies. I may have dehumanised you too, Darling—Darling, thrice Darling Kira, so forgive me, as I am trying very, very hard to forgive you before my dirty trick on Friday.

Ali the Ever-Absent Husband will, I am sure, have no guilty conscience about the Friday mishap. Perfectionists feel only guilty about their own petty failings; they are condescending and superior about the weaknesses of the rest of humanity. Is this due to the humanist's self-centred interest in man, man and man *über alles*? There should be something above man, if only to jerk him out of his slimy groping within the womb-like self.

Darling Kira, will you please remember to jot down something really crazy in that book I am reading now? It's for the inquest, you understand. We must be considerate to Ali the Husband. He has a capacity for love, and in a humanitarian perfectionist this spells real danger. I tell you, he may still experience a decent breakdown and, unlike you, Darling, become a human being surprised by life into living.

By the way, the title of that book for scribbling in is *Death in the Afternoon*.

Wednesday

Oh, My Darling, I feel so awful this morning. Only two more days to bear up, but I cannot promise you anything.

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I may not have enough courage to lift up the mattress. I should have, it is the softest coffin lid ever prepared by a destructive maniac.

His Sancta Simplicitas: why did he not come yesterday? What is the Husband doing now? Do you hear my tinny record, Darling: "Ali loves you, loves you, loves you——" and the same fifty times round.

Only that silly goose of a nurse blabbering her bits of gossip about Mrs. Ragandbone and Mrs Antique and I do not remember who else. The doctor—your fat, cowardly ex-lover, Kira, not mine! —he has just gone. He bores me stiff, why do you still keep him like a patched-up old-fashioned coat? He is just a piece of material which clings to the flesh and can also talk.

Darling Kira, Mrs. Thompson is ever so superstitious. My bull drawings frighten her. I had to invent a Sicilian proverb to convince her that the bull was more than a stupid sex symbol. And I am afraid I will have to give her two postcards with just that drawing, otherwise she might not think the letters sufficiently macabre after Friday. Like all women who work for sick people she cannot imagine herself being dead. And I told her:

"Dear Mrs. Thompson, you will pop off dead if you forget to post my letters from Palermo. And do you know why? Because I put my dead tooth into one of them, and after my death this tooth will make me live for exactly a year. So I could come from the grave and bump you off at night."

She nearly fainted, silly goose, because I used all those slang expressions from the films.

Now you go to bed, Kira, and get some rest. We are both tired. I thought of Palermo as the best place to post

our mail from, because I am really fond of you, Kira, and you fell in love with Sicily, you did, Darling. You always fall in love with landscape above everything else.

Pretty, pretty Jewess, sweet and pretty. *Was willst du noch mehr?*

Thursday (Morning)

The two envelopes are ready and addressed to you, Miss Kira Pinski. I shall have to give them to Mrs. Thompson after lunch; her superstition might wear off, if I did not produce the macabre goods. Here they are, on my bed.

In the first envelope I shall place the lonely chipped tooth and a smutty short story about the bull and the innocent lily. This is your sexy *au revoir*, Kira Darling, to Ali the Bull on Tour. You remember that pornographic album with plump Abyssinian maids you yourself spied out in hubby's shed? You put it back on the shelf next to Coleridge, in your ever-so-witty manner, as silly Mrs. Thompson would say. So Ali-Baba has a wide range of interests. He will enjoy the story and keep the tooth as a souvenir.

I wish I were a downright coward, Kira, and flunked your suicide again. Oh, my God! wherever you are, if you are at all—oh, my God, show me your total absence or deny it with an act, any act whatsoever. Pray, Kira, pray, little sister, pray for the isolation of the body from the infidel mind. Without your prayer I cannot do it, I shall not do it; Kira, do you hear?

Thursday (noon)

Father Murphy scolded me a week ago for uttering a

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heretical comment on Christ's death. He was perhaps right in saying that a civilised non-believer should hold his tongue when matters of faith are discussed by religious men.

But this, my Darling Kira, I have to repeat before we part company tomorrow afternoon: Christ knew all the time He was going to die on the cross, yet He refused to make use of His knowledge.

Why should God have allowed God to commit suicide, why? Christ, am I merely that other robber who abused You in Your agony?"

No, I am a Jewess and proud of it. I, too, could have wiped your bleeding face with my kerchief. I, too, could have choked to death in that chamber with the Others. If I belong to them, do I belong to you also?

Oh, Christ my Darling, for the isolation of . . . I cannot any longer, cannot . . .

FIVE

"I have bad news to tell you, Dolores."

She took Alexander's hand and looked into his eyes. It was the fifth of March, the anniversary of Kira's death, and they had met to make love in Ela's flat. Dolores did not prompt him to tell her what it was. She respected his hesitation as he had respected hers. Even now Dolores could not decide whether they should stay or leave the car and go to their loaned bedroom.

"My wife is dead. She died a few hours ago." His lie

had a quiet authority of truth. "I don't think we should see each other for some time."

Dolores drew back her hand and said in a stilted voice:

"I am terribly sorry, Alexander." There was a long pause. "But you shouldn't have told me about her death. She didn't exist for me when she was alive. Now she's begun to live because she's dead. This may sound cruel to you, Alexander, but——"

He answered quietly:

"It isn't cruel, Dolores. Some people have to die first before they can assert themselves in our life."

"I understand. She's already asserted herself in mine. Now I think I should know her name. What is it?"

"Kira."

"It's a Russian name, isn't it?"

"I think so, but she was a Jewess, a genuine one, who tried to be honest with herself. It's hard for a Jew to separate his individual problems from those of his race. Very hard, if not impossible."

"I do know, Alexander, what the memory of a race can do to one. I've tried to contain mine. It could have killed me otherwise."

She shuddered, but her face had the radiance of an ancient hope or a young resignation. She even smiled after a pause and took his hand again.

"Alexander," she said, "I also had bad news ready for you, but it has waited a few weeks. Now it's suddenly two pieces of bad news, but I should tell you the first one——first."

He knew what to expect.

"I am leaving London for good," she said. "Not immediately, but soon enough. In three or four weeks' time. I

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shall live in Sweden, you know. It's rather strange to have become an ambassador's wife. She, poor thing, should be so terribly high above suspicion. I hate heights."

Her English intonation was certainly above suspicion: it sounded awfully impressive, and she used 'awfully' at the earliest opportunity. But Alexander sensed the irony underlying the easy flow of words: she was rehearsing her future part with a subtle ingredient of diplomatic boredom.

"What is your other piece, Dolores?"

"Of bad news?"

"Yes."

"Well—this." She lit a match and brought it towards her throat. "The moon has shown us her ironic grin." Dolores wore a heavy silver necklace with the grimacing face of the full moon on it and the flame of the match contorted it further. "We can't make love tonight, or tomorrow or the day after tomorrow."

He understood and felt embarrassed, because he had desperately wanted to confirm their physical right to love. The match was shrinking, but he could just see the glow of her profile. The beauty of it almost hurt.

"Perhaps the moon is really kind to us," Dolores added. "She tries to spare us the terror of the last act."

Alexander knew at that moment that he could not and should not experience another trial of bodies with Dolores. A curtain had already fallen on to their love and they had not heard its sepulchral thud.

But was he at the same moment aware of other curtains going down imperceptibly all round him? Did he expect them to rise later for new players, and new viewers? The stage would never alter, it would be the same under in-

ISOLATION

visible specks of dust; and neither he nor those strangers around him would ever know anything real about the stage itself.

Alexander asked Dolores to drive by his house at eleven that night. He said he wanted to see her car in its fleeting isolation. He would watch it pass from the dark socket of his window. And he learnt then that she had known his address for some months. But later—he argued with an obsessional pedantry—they should both observe the finality of their decision. She had his special map of London, Alexander said, it would be quite simple to avoid each other with the help of his cross-references.

They parted at half-past seven in the evening.

"I have to see the priest," he said.

"But, of course," she answered. "I understand."

Alexander did not kiss her mouth. Touching the body which he loved now more than ever had become a taboo. Instead he kissed the Aztec moon on her silver necklace. It was like paying a homage to the subjugated race within her.

He did go to see the priest. Father Murphy had expected his visit after the revelation of Mrs. Thompson's secret. The priest himself opened the door: she had already cooked his meal and had gone to the cinema.

Their conversation was brief and his sweating on the face less profuse. But the handkerchief's movements up and down still accompanied Father Murphy's words.

"How did I meet your wife, you ask me? Now, that's a rather touching incident, though I was reluctant to mention it to you. You understand, Mr. Arnin, she met me, so to speak, in the confessional."

"If you'd rather not tell, Father, please don't.

ACT FIVE: CURTAINS

"But I should now, Mr. Arnin. It's not concerned with any secrecy. You see, your wife did make her confession to me. When she finished I saw her dress, which was white, and she looked just like a very young girl. So I asked her whether she was making her First Communion. She said yes, but I soon realised that she had misunderstood me. Then your wife said she wasn't a Catholic at all, but since she had confessed to me, she could take the communion at once. I explained to her that she couldn't, and this started an argument. Your wife, Mr. Arnin, was so good at heated discussions. I had my work to do, so she invited me to tea for the following Monday. We became good friends. I miss her very much; Mrs. Arnin, I think, brought out the best in me."

"I am beginning to miss Kira now," Alexander said and looked at the priest's handkerchief hovering above his small pointed ear.

"One afternoon I tried to tell Mrs. Arnin about guardian angels and she liked what I told her. As usual she had an extraordinary idea at hand to weave into my simple account. And I remember, she said the most striking thing to me on that occasion, Mr. Arnin."

"What did Kira say, Father?"

"She argued that if our soul is indeed immortal, then there's such a power locked inside it that we need some guardian spirit to protect us; otherwise we might blow up ourselves and the world by misusing that power within us. Mind you, it's not exactly what I would preach from the pulpit, but I like the poetic concept. Your wife was certainly a very stimulating person to have an argument with."

"Yes, she loved arguments."

"In a strange way, your wife strengthened my faith. I gave her so little in return."

"And what did I give Kira? Money and my isolation, and she didn't like either." Alexander paused. "Father, could you answer my own query? It's not easy to put into words. Why am I obsessed by the desire to live in isolation, yet, when isolated, why do I experience this unspecified feeling of absence, as if someone else was about to enter? Yet I know I would prefer space to be utterly empty."

"I wouldn't like to simplify your problem in a priest's fashion, Mr. Arnim. But solitude, I feel, is the beginning of a dialogue with oneself or with one's soul, if you don't mind the word. Such a dialogue usually leads to a dialogue with God. That's perhaps why so many people are afraid of solitude, but they are really afraid of talking with God, Mr. Arnin."


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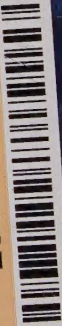
At eleven Dolores's car passed his house. It skidded at the turning as it went downhill. The red light at the back reminded him of her cigarette burning in the dark.

What secrets did she carry then; what secrets was she going to drive in her car? Would Dolores ever write letters to herself, leaving the other confessional empty? Alexander stood by the window and stared at his own reflection in the murky glass. A spy's holiday was over.

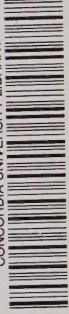
Everybody runs his little theatre, putting on plays in one, three or five acts; and in our spare time we all are one another's spies, except that we need not sell our information. The rate of barter is already fixed and quite fair: an eye for an eye, a secret for a secret.

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